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## MURDERING THE COMPETITION

ARE THIS YEAR'S KILLER GAMES REALLY WINNERS OR THE BIGGEST VICTIMS OF ALL?

## ODDWORLD STRANGER

AN IN-DEPTH LOOK INSIDE LORNE LANNING'S MOST OPULENT ODYSSEY YET

## ACTIVISION'S ANNIVERSARY

FROM PITFALL TO DOOM 3: THE WORLD'S OLDEST THIRDPARTY PUBLISHER HITS 25

## MAJORA'S MASK

A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON THE DARK ART OF NINTENDO'S FORGOTTEN MASTERPIECE

**PREVIEWED** ICO 2 **PRINCE OF PERSIA 2** THE BARD'S TALE **DEVIL MAY CRY 3** RESIDENT EVIL 4 **SHINING TEARS**

**REVIEWED** HALF-LIFE 2 **HALO 2** GTA: SAN ANDREAS **METROID PRIME 2** KILLZONE **PAPER MARIO 2** PIRATES!

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HALO 2
Earth Will Never Be The Same

Welcome to a new issue of **Edge**, in which you will notice a number of changes. First, there's the format of the magazine itself. It's not that the Australian **Edge** team have been unhappy with the layout or design, but rather understandably, that the UK team have got that urge to overhaul things, because no truly professional journalist ever likes to rest on their laurels. That said, **Edge** has become recognised internationally for its outstanding design, so it's also little wonder most of the changes are tweaks, rather than fundamental shifts to a new style or ideal.

Another change this month concerns Nintendo. It seems like only yesterday that speculation over the company's forthcoming DS handheld system concerned not how it might actually revolutionise gaming, but just how heavy a white elephant it would turn out to be. Confidence in the sleeping Kyoto giant had long been ebbing away, even among those who've slavishly followed its output since the early '80s (and it comes to something when you can't even depend on Nintendo diehards to rally in the face of adversity), but in Japan recently we have seen a company brimming with potential once more. The attraction of the DS hardware is such that everyone wants to have a piece of it, from Namco to Sega to EA to every ambitious outfit in between, and once you've spent some time with the finished hardware it's easy to see why. This month's hands-on report (see page 44) assesses the console's suite of deliciously inventive features and rounds-up the key DS software currently in development around the world.

Although **Edge** has traditionally been about the tomorrow of videogaming, this issue it was impossible not to mavel at gaming today. *GTA: San Andreas*, *Halo 2* and *Half-Life 2* have all landed within a month of each other, thrusting the gaming world into what even the most jaded gamer would be tempted to refer to as a golden age. Money may generally be considered the enemy of art, or it may ironically be what helps the pioneers and visionaries realise their ambitions.

Speaking of money, these rare examples of gaming perfection have already made less than they deserve to via piracy, another issue touched on this issue.

Read the magazine and let us know what you think – about Nintendo's DS, the new-look **Edge**, piracy, a new golden age of gaming, whatever. We're always interested in what you have to say.
That's one thing that hasn't changed.



**EDGE**

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Why are you looking at this? Go and read the interview with Rose, or something. Honestly.

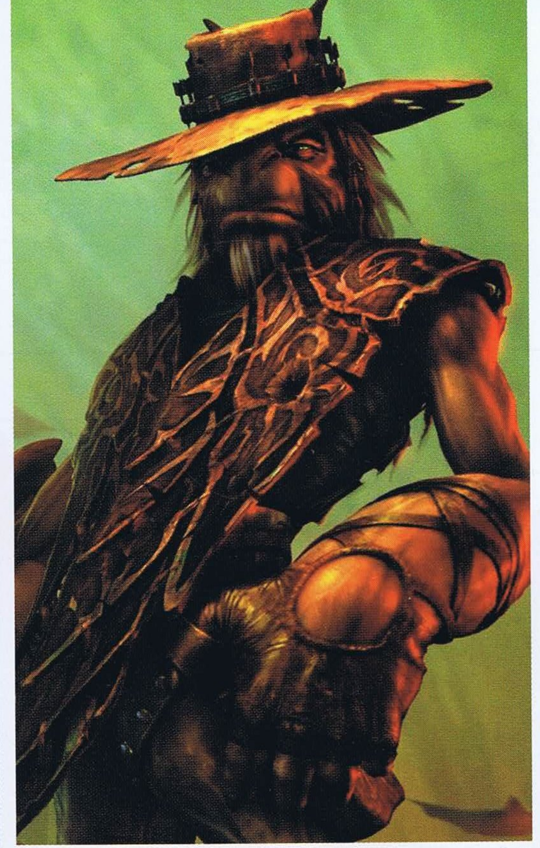
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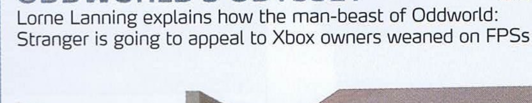


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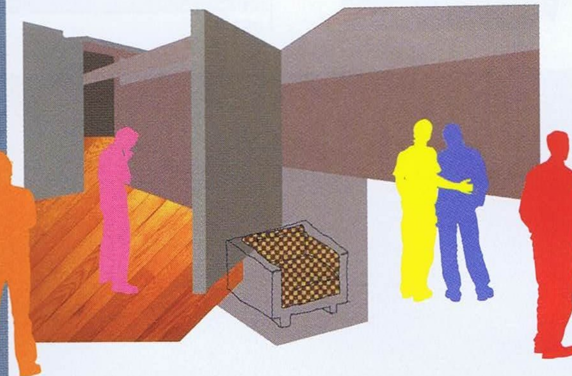
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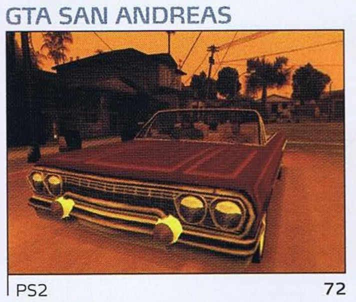
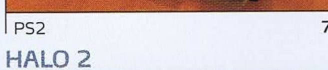
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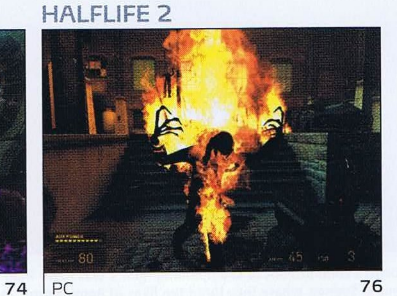
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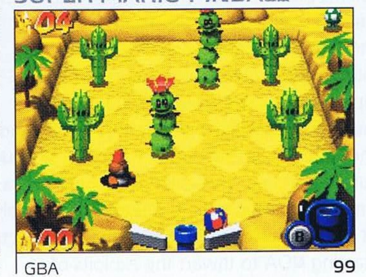

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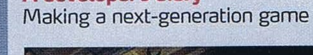

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# Pioneering piracy

## Are the games that drive the industry also driving the piracy that plagues it?



Microsoft's commitment to championing Halo 2 was more than evident in Sydney, where they hired the likes of Regurgitator to play the launch at Sydney's Pitt St mall Myer store. The turnout was smaller than expected, though, as many fans turned up for the midnight launches being held at local retailers throughout Sydney and Melbourne. Piracy was highly unlikely to be a factor

For developers of the best games released around the world, there's an unwilling acceptance of the fact that software pirates will always find a way to duplicate and distribute illegitimate copies on pretty much any game they like. Even cartridge based systems like the N64 proved capable of falling victim to piracy, although the plight faced by the present generation of gaming systems is naturally far worse than any system that uses an expensive proprietary format.

Now, at a time where Edge magazine gives three 10s in one issue – something akin to a cosmic alignment of the videogame industry, piracy has struck once again. In 2003 Half-Life 2 was leaked, and perhaps that's part of the reason it has received enough extra attention to become a 10, and some cynics cited the whole scandal as a publicity stunt, but Valve were no happier about the situation than Bungie or Rockstar would be over the fact that both Halo 2 and GTA: San Andreas were available through pirate circles before they were released.

Naturally, none of the companies behind the games in question are in a rush to discuss the sort of damages they've suffered, understandably preferring to talk about the merits of buying such worthy titles at a time like this. However, with Ubisoft, one of the companies most likely to have to stave off piracy with their upcoming Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory, Owen Hughes, PR Manager from Ubisoft's Australian offices offered thoughts from a perspective of a publisher that knows it's going to have to face the issue.

"Besides the regular copy protection safeguards on retail product, security has been heightened in our development studios over the past few years," said Hughes. "Obviously, Bungie and Rockstar would have similar arrangements in place. Yet this still didn't prevent early versions of their games being available for download prior to release. This leads to the conclusion that, even internally, many studios still have security concerns that need to be addressed. Ubisoft have yet to encounter any such problems but we must remain vigilant about where our early code goes and who with."

It's ironic at a time where Edge magazine highlights the problems of leaks faced by companies like Valve aren't affecting Metroid Prime, the current flagship title for the Nintendo GameCube – a system whose mascot is of course, a plumber. There's clear evidence that there's a far less mystical reason behind Nintendo's relatively tight ship, with Nintendo fans in the US proactively contacting NOA to thwart the exploits of companies importing cheap console game systems that come with a collection of pirated NES games.

**The interesting data about Gamecube owners is that they tend to own more legitimate pieces of software per console than the other two formats**

"This action is one of many steps Nintendo is taking to protect its creative rights and to combat the growing international problem of product piracy," stated Jodi Daugherty, Nintendo of America's director of anti-piracy. "Nintendo won't tolerate these illegal products, and is grateful to its devoted customers. We'll aggressively protect the quality and integrity of the video game products our fans are so loyal to."

On the subject of Nintendo systems being more financially viable as a result of this loyalty and proprietary formats translating to lower losses to piracy, Ubisoft's Owen Hughes mused, "I think this may be true in regions where the Gamecube has a higher install base, but the install base in Australia and New Zealand is still a fraction of the market leader, PS2. The interesting data about Gamecube owners is that they tend to own more legitimate software per console than the other two formats. Whether this reflects a lack of illegal options or a more dedicated and brand-loyal consumer of Nintendo products could only be determined if we had more accurate data about piracy habits amongst the modified consoles."

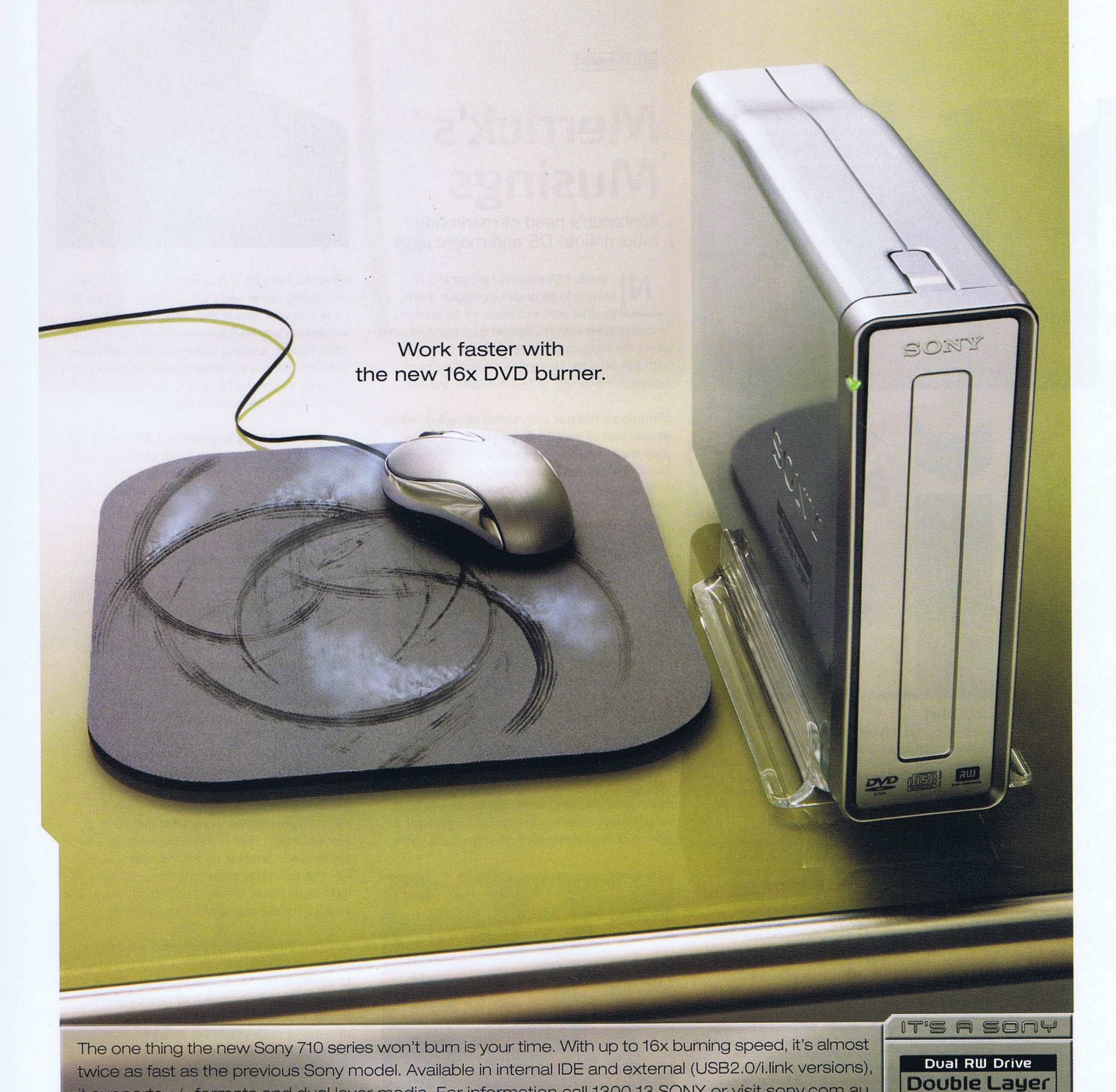
This, along with the Halo 2 launch referenced above, make it clear that quantifying the true effects of these particular software leaks will take time to quantify properly. Do the big games actually drive pirates to perfect the art of undermining the industry? It's something Edge is already researching for a future in-depth feature.

### Newswire



**Europe leaks Halo 2 to chipped community**

**Only a few days after the announcement that the game had gone gold, the first pirated *Halo 2* files became available on the internet. The source is seemingly a European disk replication plant, and the game code – playable only on chipped Xboxes – is PAL and in French. Microsoft has announced that it considers "downloading this code or making it available for others to download as theft," and is aggressively pursuing the source of the leak. The news must be particularly galling for Bungie, which has kept nearly all details of the singleplayer game secret in the hope of preserving the purity of the experience for the player. The developer has also reacted strongly, announcing via its forums that it would block the gamertags of users who helped spread the files: "We are NOT kidding around here. There will be no warning, no appeal, you'll just be gone." The game's release date remained unaffected.**




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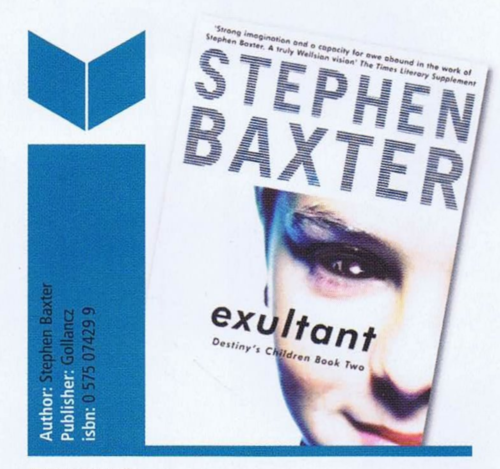
RESURRECTION



## Ultima heaven

**Bringing a classic back to life with some genius codework**

Resurrection of the month comes in the shape of Exult, an engine designed to take the data files from Origin's legendary RPG *Ultima 7: The Black Gate* (and its sequel, *Serpent Isle*) and run the game on modern PCs. It's been playable for a while now, allowing players to complete both adventures with a few enhancements and a few minor flaws. The latest improvement, though, is something of a marvel: Exult now takes the bounding boxes of the two-dimensional sprites and automatically remodels them in 3D, adding an extra dimension to Lord British's realm. It works better on some objects than others, of course – buildings are wonderful, the characters more like skewed cardboard cut-outs – but it's a brilliant piece of lateral thinking, and one that deserves attention. Visit exult.sourceforge.net for more.




Author: Stephen Baxter
Publisher: Gollancz
isbn: 0 575 07429 9

## EXULTANT

**Nothing to do with Ultima VII, this fantasy is set in an unsettling future**

A year on from the opening of his Destiny's Children trilogy, Stephen Baxter's latest jumps 25,000 years into a future clouded by total war. Having struggled against waves of alien invaders within its solar system, humanity has since pushed far into the galaxy's heart. But now it has met its most implacable foe: the unknowable Xeelee. With spaceships powered by the fabric of space-time and the ability to know what their enemy will do before they do it, they make for a formidable foe. Thanks to the sheer numbers of vat-produced human soldiers, combined with a strict political and religious structure promoting the race to the exclusion of the self, the forces are at stalemate. Three thousand years on, and the tension is growing in the human hierarchy, until local tactical advantage is forced by an individual's act. It's exactly the sort of backdrop that gives Baxter the opportunity to plait together his favoured themes of cosmology, evolution and the more extreme possibilities of quantum physics. Whether it provides a decent enough framework for a battling sci-fi yarn is less clear though. There are some neat touches: The futility of space-war hasn't been done as well since 2000 AD's Halo Jones, while the acceptance of time travel means different 'time-stamped' copies of individuals co-exist. But, as often in the middle of a trilogy, the ending proves something of a let down.

INTERVIEW

# Merrick's Musings

**Nintendo's head of marketing talks online, DS and magic eggs**



Nintendo DS's wireless functionality is proving to be one of its biggest draws, so what does this mean for Nintendo's overall strategy with multiplayer gaming? And what about the bigger gaming picture? We sat down with **Jim Merrick**, Nintendo's senior director of European marketing, to find out some answers.

**Nintendo's still not committed to online; what proportion of people do you think want to play traditional online games?**

There's certainly a lot of interest in the technology, a lot of technology-driven demand for online gaming, but is there demand for online gaming based on gameplay? I'm not so sure. I have a background working on online for Nintendo, we did a lot of work building infrastructure and systems, but we couldn't get a strong sense of consumer demand. The value proposition just hasn't been there. That's not to say that online gaming isn't a lot of fun for a narrow sector of the market, it just hasn't hit mass market yet. I'm not sure that average Joe gamer perceives enough benefit to outweigh the hurdles.

**But those hurdles – technological and financial – are diminishing. What will the situation be when they become negligible?**

I think online can be a compelling feature in the right game, so I can play with people I know rather than strangers, rather than being beaten by an eight-year-old who has devoted a significant portion of their young life to that particular game.




The N64 played host to the revolutionary Mario 64, and Merrick suggests we'll see the same leap with Nintendo's next hardware

Nintendo has a lot of properties which could be compelling online – let's say *Pokémon*, that could work very well. Would that mean that people would stop playing *Pokémon* offline? Not at all. It's just a feature, a strong feature. It's like multiplayer gaming. A strong multiplayer game must always stand on its own feet as a strong singleplayer game because your friends aren't always around.

**Is Nintendo trying to pioneer a different kind of online gaming – more local, more physical?**

I like online gaming – wireless gaming as an extension of multiplayer gaming, of social gaming. Why is it that *Mario Kart* or *GoldenEye* are so much fun? It's because I'm in the same room as you and I can sense your pain. I can taunt you and revel in my victory with you. And I lose a lot of that in an online environment – even with Xbox Live or even with a *SOCOM* headset, it's not the same. And it's the social gaming aspect that I'm excited about.

**How much do you gain by letting Sony and Microsoft pioneer online gaming and make the mistakes for you?**

Certainly, financially it's an incredible advantage. I'm not quite sure how much money Microsoft is willing to lose on Xbox or Xbox Live. It appears to be an awful lot. They're proving technology, they're testing consumer response and we can take advantage of all of that. At the end of the day, as is so often the case, it comes down to the games themselves. I don't feel that we're at a disadvantage. I know the people who want to see Nintendo compete on a technological level feel that we're way behind the times. But it isn't a technology battle. We're about entertainment, and I don't think the entertainment is there yet.

**With the N64, Nintendo was criticised for having too few games which took too long to develop. You've addressed that with the GameCube. But the N64 had two Edge 10s, the GC has had none. Have you lost something with your new policy?**

I don't think so. Look at *Mario 64*. Not just a phenomenal game, it was a revolutionary game. It was the first game where 3D gaming really worked. GameCube isn't offering that kind of revolution. It's an evolution of 3D gameplay in the same way


Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicles is still the most ambitious thirdparty link-up game, and yet it fell short. Hopefully the DS sequel will perfect its ideas



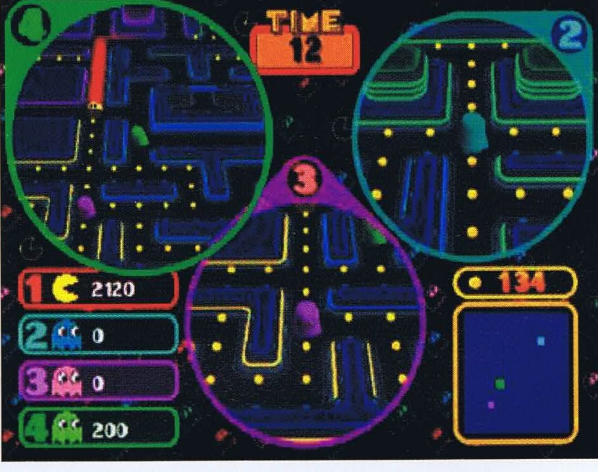

## WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

**The Strangerhood is the latest (read: second) show from Rooster Teeth Productions, the team behind *Halo* sitcom Red vs Blue. It takes *The Sims 2* as its engine, interesting not just because Simsville has a completely different feel to Blood Gulch, but because these days they're too well noticed to be entirely irreverent without some comeback. Hence EA legitimising The Strangerhood; in a Q&A session after their recent presentation at ResFest, The Red vs Blue crew promised that the publisher's input was limited to ensuring their material matches with the game's age rating. They also promised less swearing, and more innuendo.**

**Site:** The Strangerhood
**URL:** www.strangerhood.com/home.php



that PS2 is an evolution of PS1. Historically, we've gone from revolution to evolution. NES was a revolution, SNES was an evolution; N64 revolution, GC evolution, hence 'Revolution is coming'. So where does that revolution come from? We don't have a fourth dimension handy, waiting in the wings, so what you're going to see is Nintendo experimenting with human interface technology, whether it's the touchscreen – we've done a lot over the years, introducing rumble, introducing analogue. We see this as an evolving area, and I think Nintendo can show its leadership there.






**Another criticism of the N64 was that Nintendo failed to effectively court thirdparty publishers. It was something you pledged to improve with the GameCube, and yet we've seen a similar drop-off in support. Isn't that worrying?**
Yes, it is. It's an ongoing challenge for us. We have to compete very hard with Microsoft and Sony not just in offering a good business model, but good relationship management with these companies. We've got a great relationship with EA. We're working very closely with Capcom and Konami – it's easier of course in Japan, where these relationships are older, but we're working very hard across the world.

> **"I would like to have games which are designed around one platform. If you take a game which is the same on every platform, then you don't need it on the DS"**

**So what is the barrier to these third parties? Is it the licensing costs, the demographic issues, the controller design?**
It's everything – well, I should say, I don't know if the controller design is one of the issues or not! Demographics are perceived – oftentimes we'll find a thirdparty will bring us games which are skewed younger because that's where they perceive that the GameCube has its strength. That may be true, but you can look at it the other way around and say there's a market opportunity, there's a gap. If I don't have a football game on that platform it should be an opportunity. So we really have to work with third parties so they see the opportunities and don't try to pigeonhole us.

**Nintendo has tried to improve the situation this generation and it hasn't managed it. Will you have to try something different with the next generation of hardware?**
Look, I don't have, you know, the magic egg that will solve the problem. It's something that Nintendo is working on and trying to communicate more directly with the licensees. We're running develop conferences for the DS, it's that sort of thing that will improve things – getting information out to developers sooner, getting dev kits out sooner, making the business model more appealing by keeping the costs of development tools down.

**Nintendo DS is a bold vision for the future of game development. Doesn't this kind of innovation make it even harder for thirdparties to come to you, as they have get their heads around a whole new way of designing games, which are only going to be compatible with one system?**
Well, to some extent, yes, that's true. I would like to have games which are designed exclusively around one platform, because if you take a game which is essentially the same on every platform, then you don't really need it on the DS. If you take something like *Pac-Man*, when we announced that we were going to show *Pac-Man* at E3 everyone's eyes rolled back in there heads and said: "*Pac-Man* again, are you kidding?", but when they saw what we'd done with it, they loved it.

**But *Pac-Man* is an interesting example. Namco was one of the few companies to embrace GC-GBA connectivity, Nintendo's last big hardware innovation, with *Pac-Man Vs*. But it had so little faith in the project it wouldn't even market it separately. Nintendo has been the only company to fully exploit GC/GBA link-up. How does that change with DS?**
The connectivity issue was a big challenge. We saw an opportunity to use some of the features of the GBA, some of the features of the GC to the betterment of both. But you're right, it creates a challenge for the publisher. For them, their GC teams and their GBA teams may be in separate buildings, separate companies even, and it's hard to get them to agree on what can be done. For Nintendo, we're working in-house and it's much easier. We may have miscalculated in terms of third-party support. I think we didn't communicate fully – to the publishers or the consumers – what the benefits of connectivity were. For an incremental amount of programming you can add fantastic value and really boost sales. But we didn't communicate it effectively. That's something we're going to change with the DS.

GESTURE

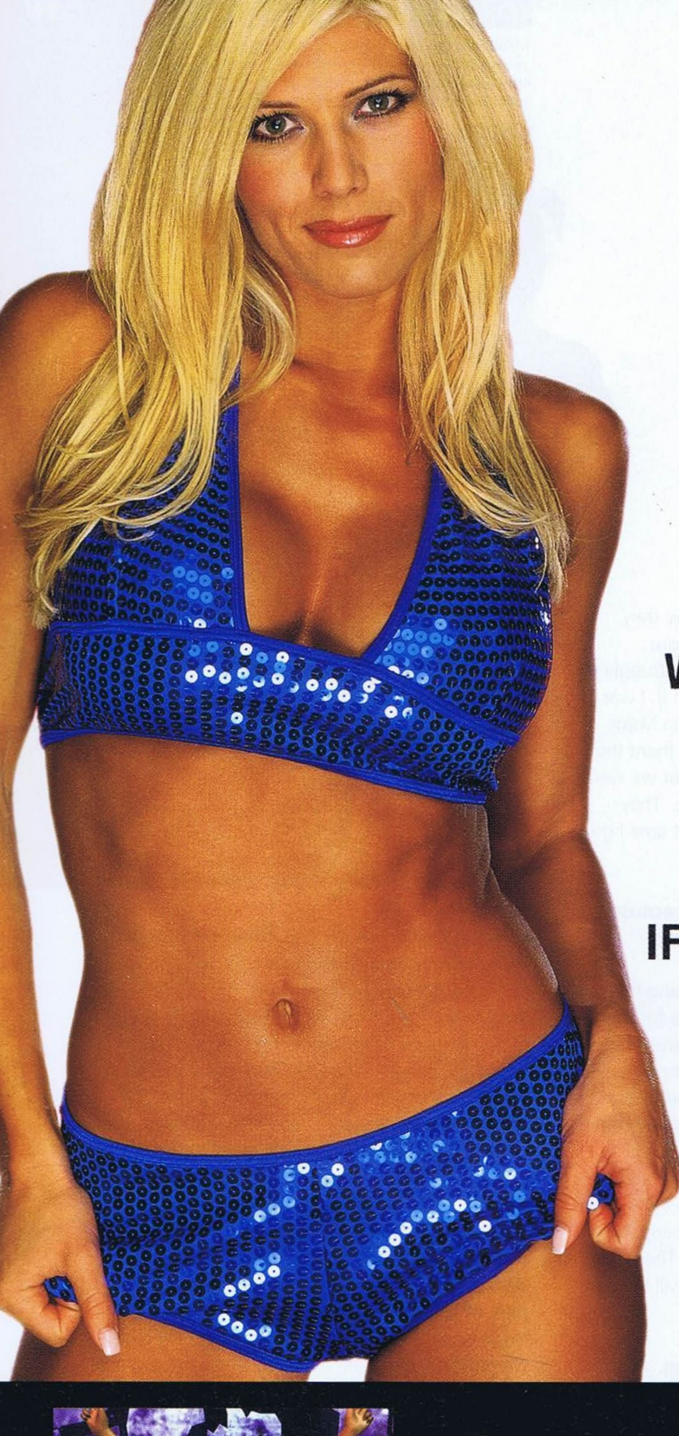
# Flattery gets everywhere

## Rare follows Rockstar in tipping a wink to some mag or other

Once upon a time, Rare's supersquirrel Conker amused himself with a handheld console, yet now he's grown up a little he's taken to reading, as this image from the forthcoming Xbox title *Conker: Live & Reloaded* illustrates. Drudge's next-month page is in an odd place, but the price seems about right, plus the entire concept is nicked from *Vice City*, and you can't argue with that. Expect more spoofery in the finished title, due in March.




The original pastiche, as seen in Grand Theft Auto: Vice City. Use your scope to get a good look at that loving detail



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INTERVIEW

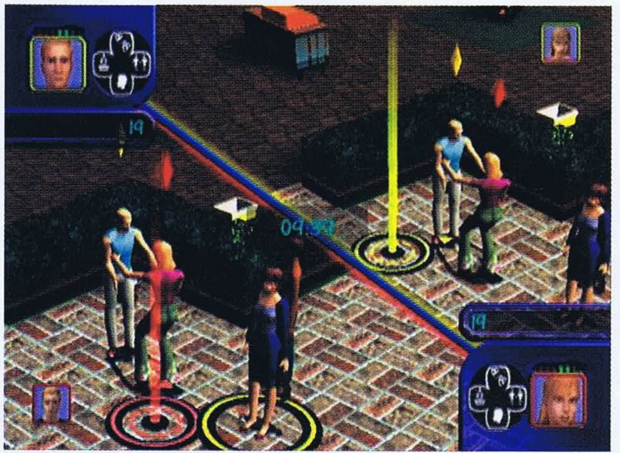
# The truth behind the biggest PC game ever

It's sold more copies than any other computer game, and yet The Sims' history is a convoluted one. We went in search of answers

As *The Sims 2* begins to really get its teeth into gamers the world over, we thought it'd be an appropriate time to catch up with **Will Wright**, head of Maxis and the man behind the multimillion-selling original game, to discover the truth behind his success.

**So, is it true you had a problem getting the original concept of *The Sims* greenlit?**
Yeah, there was a lot of resistance within Maxis from almost everyone. We did a very early focus group in '93, where we presented like, four different ideas, and *The Sims* was one of them. We just kinda described the game, and the description was pretty close to what *The Sims* ended up being, almost exactly. And that was the one idea that everyone hated. The other three, they all liked them, said: "Yeah, you should do that. But THAT one sucks." I don't remember what the others were, they were never done, never went anywhere. But based upon that, a) I never trusted focus groups again in my life, and b) actually got more motivated to do the idea, because I knew they didn't understand what I was talking about. So, within the company it was kind of a struggle to get one or two programmers devoted to it. I was struggling, I'd taken over a small group in Maxis – used to be our tools guys – and made them the *Sims* group. They really liked the idea, but we were kind of struggling until EA bought Maxis. They were really, really into it, and for the first time I got resources on the project.

> **"I've never seen a really big hit game that was a collective decision at the start, maybe with the exception of sequels. A brand new, innovative thing has never come from a group"**



The Sims series has made the crossover to consoles (Xbox iteration pictured) but it's in the PC market where the real money's been made. The sequel is now picking up the baton

**Do you think focus groups mislead because those judging them have preconceived notions of what they like in games?**
I thought about that. When we were doing the focus group we were describing the idea for the game, and in my head, in my imagination I was playing it and it was really fun. When you give someone a brief description they're gonna build a different game in their imagination. They're gonna fill in the blanks differently – all the millions of details that make the game fun or boring, they're gonna fill in the wrong way. I think it's a little unfair to expect someone, based on a brief description, to build the exact same idea in their head. Their game won't be as fun as my game, and they will think it sucks, because their game DOES suck.

**So doesn't it follow that game design, as a creative process, has to be an individual thing?**
I think at that stage it does, yeah. Eventually you end up with a hundred or more people on the team, and it has to be something of a collaborative process. But getting the idea off the ground, that usually takes one very strong creative vision. I've never seen a really big hit game that was a collective decision at the start, maybe with the exception of sequels. A brand new, innovative thing has never come from a group, always a person. Then it's a matter of that person snowballing things, persuading people that 'oh yeah, we can do this', and then the executives, and then the marketing people. It's a process that consists of convincing more and more people, and at each stage you get more and more evidence that it's going to work.

**It's quite paradoxical, isn't it? That people see Electronic Arts as this big, terrifying conglomerate, but it's EA's financial support that pushed your individual creativity through.**
Yeah. Not to disrespect the press, but the press is always looking for the easy story to tell. It's easy to tell the story of the giant corporation that's churning, y'know, whatever. A lot of people come up to me and say: "Oh, y'know, I heard that EA tried to cancel *The Sims*!" and somehow this story's got twisted over retellings, but actually they were the ones who rescued it...



Will Wright: would you trust this man to make you a series of games about little computer people that would go on to make many millions of dollars?

**That said, EA took *The Sims*, and there've been, what, seven expansion packs since? Was producing so many add-ons always a part of the plan?**
No, it wasn't. When we were designing the game we probably spent, oh, an extra year in develpment making it as expandable as we possible could, in the hope that we could leverage that expansion. Had the game been mediocre or a flop, that money would have been wasted, but we were lucky it paid off. It paid off more than we thought – I thought that extra year, because of the expandability of the game, we might end up doubling the sales, not just with the expansions we were creating, but also with all the customisations the players were creating.

**Did you ever feel there was a danger the audience – many of whom were new to gaming – might get tired of *The Sims*?**
It's interesting, and a little counter-intuitive. With each expansion pack we tried to experiment with different things, so in a sense they became a way for us to learn which ideas worked and which didn't. A lot of the expansion packs directly influenced *The Sims 2*, and without all those





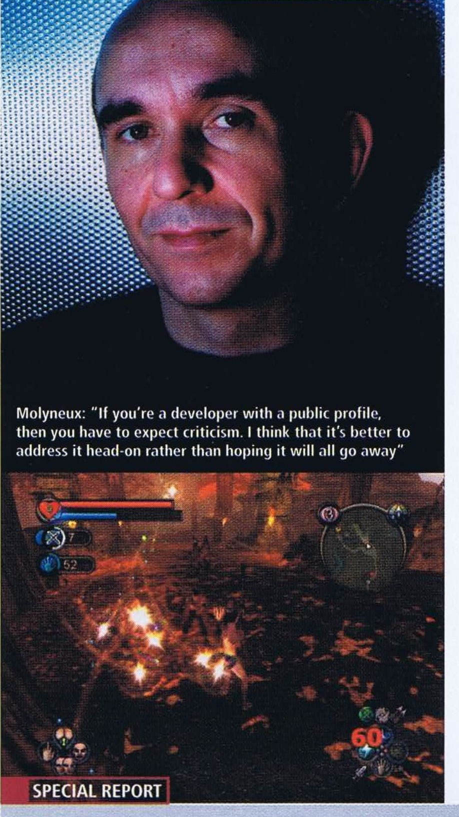

packs we'd have been flying in the dark a lot more, in terms of the directions we expanded in. Also, if you look at what you actually did in the expansion packs, certain ones seemed like major breakthroughs. Like *Hot Date*, for example, which did much better than the first two. We discovered areas that were much more important, ones where we hit the mark and thought: "Oh yeah, that works". Some people play games as disposable entertainment like a movie – you start, play for a week, put it away, go beginning, middle, end, the movie model. Some of our players played it that way, put it away, thought: "That was fun". But a lot of our players play it more like a hobby, and if people ask them: "Do you play games?" they say: "Oh yeah, I play *The Sims*," and they've been playing it for two years. They're who the expansion packs are targeted at – it's not like we're putting a gun to anyone's head and saying: "Buy this or we'll kill the puppy."

**And players could buy into any combination of expansions they wanted, too.**

Oddly enough, that's what caused us to stop at seven. We did the first expansion pack, and we had to test it with the game. When we did the second, we had to test it with the game, and with the game and the first expansion pack. With the third one, we had to test with, like, four combinations. And so on, and by the seventh pack, we had to test like 64 different combinations, and by that stage we were like, there's no way we can test an eighth one. Easy to make, impossible to test.

**So in the end *The Sims* series was actually killed by mathematics?**

Yeah, basically. By exponentional reasoning.



Molyneux: "If you're a developer with a public profile, then you have to expect criticism. I think that it's better to address it head-on rather than hoping it will all go away"




The things people say about videogames

**"It is unlikely that we would hire someone who didn't show good proficiency at a Game Boy or online poker or similar video-type game where hand-to-eye coordination is important"**
**Mary McDonnel**, president of Geneva Trading, explains how being good at *OutRun 2* could make you rich.

"Let me tell you something. Those little women at the Tokyo Game Show with those portable consoles strapped to them... What you didn't see is that those women were having to go recharge the batteries every two hours!"
Nintendo's **Reggie Fils-Aime** takes a stab at the PSP during the Gamers' Summit in Seattle.

**"I think the real indicator will be when somebody confesses that they cried at level 17... The next big emotional breakthrough in gaming is being able to tell a story that is consistent throughout the narrative. If the game is 15 levels, it's just like 15 chapters in a story"**
**Steven Spielberg** demonstates how much he's been paying attention.

SPECIAL REPORT

# Molyneux acknowledges critics

## "I'm incapable of sticking to any pre-planned PR strategy"

Lionhead chief **Peter Molyneux** is no stranger to controversy over how closely the reality of his games matches his boundless vision for them. But his decision to publicly apologise on Lionhead's forums regarding the typically controversial *Fable* (reviewed in **E**1) was a frank acknowledgement of this discrepancy.

We asked Molyneux if this new, somewhat humbled stance indicated a change in the enthusiastic personality that has won him as many supporters as critics.

"I can't see myself changing as a person: I'd find it very hard to curb my enthusiasm, as it's bound up with why I make games," he confessed. "What I will do is highlight that some of the features I'm demoing are experimental, and that when you show a game during its development it's just a snapshot of how the game is at that moment."

Given that the nature of his blue-sky titles has attracted criticism dating back to his work with Bullfrog, we questioned if there was a specific issue that prompted his decision. "The real catalyst was the complaints that we were getting on [Lionhead's forums], which we take very seriously, that people felt cheated certain features hadn't made it into the game," he said. "We never had any intention to mislead, and I wanted to explain that we couldn't sacrifice the quality of the game for ideas which didn't add to the experience."

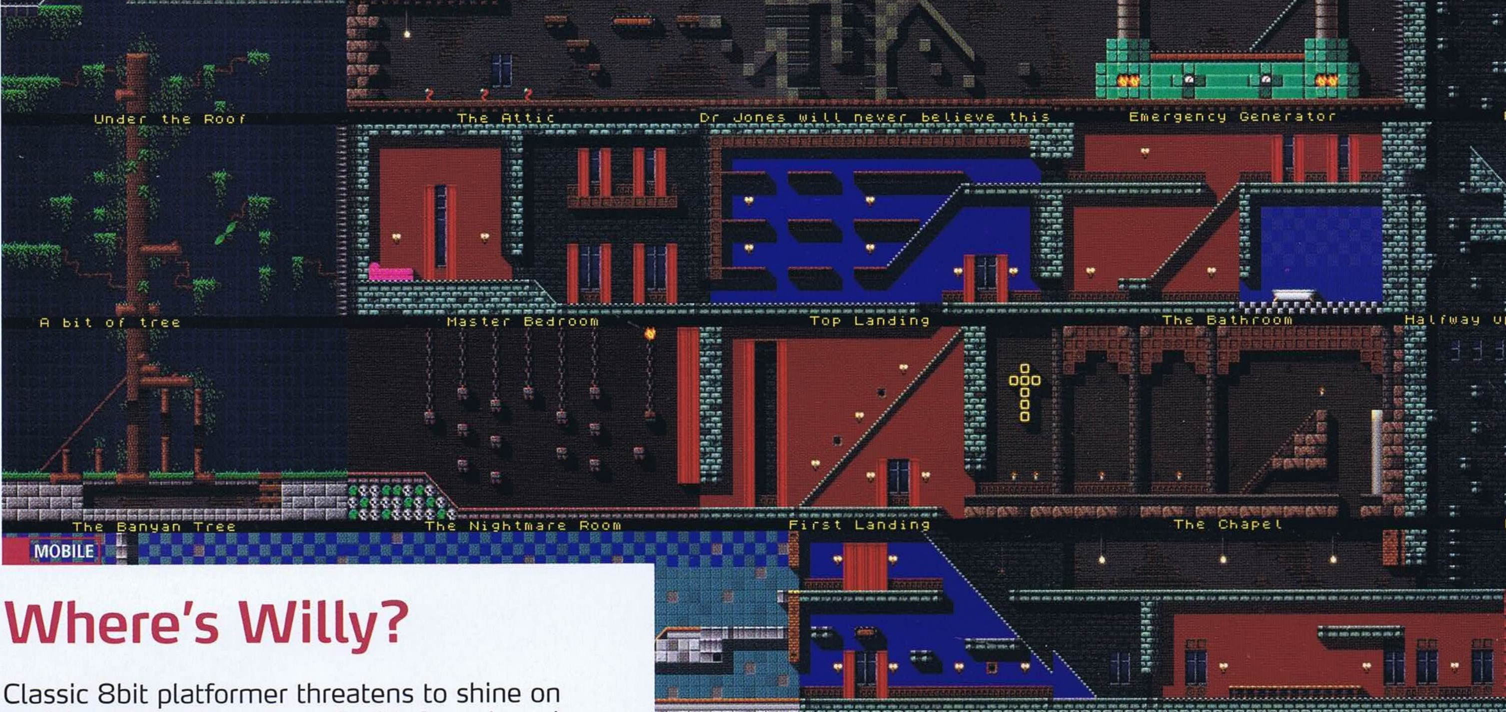
To the suggestion that future Lionhead titles might be promoted with a more typically corporate, controlled release of assets, Molyneux remained ebullient – "I can assure you that I'm incapable of sticking to any pre-planned PR strategy for very long" – indicating that his intention will be to qualify, rather than omit, his passion: "I'm always going to talk about my dreams, but I'll be clearer that these are dreams that may or may not make it into a finished game."




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MOBILE

# Where's Willy?

## Classic 8bit platformer threatens to shine on mobiles, then disappears. Smith fans despair

Remember the place depicted above? It is, of course, the mansion from classic 8bit platformer *Jet Set Willy*. Except it sort of isn't, since this is an overhauled version of the game, each room recreated with gameplay that is true to the original but with full-colour backgrounds and sprites. And it runs on most game-friendly mobile phone handsets. Or at least it would if it'd actually been finished. We contacted its developers at www.numfum.com to find out when they game would be released and were told that work was nearly completed when Jester Interactive, the owner of the *JSW* licence, stopped paying. And everything since is a mystery. So, publishers, consider this a plea: buy the rights from Jester and get it finished and released. You know it makes sense.



## AT A STORE NEAR YOU

What we said about games hitting shelves this month

**Fable (Xbox)** — E1, 8/10

'If you are vain enough to indulge in virtual cosmetics and *Sims*-style character management, you'll discover a hero worth caring about'

**Pro Evolution Soccer 4 (PS2/Xbox)** — E2, 8/10

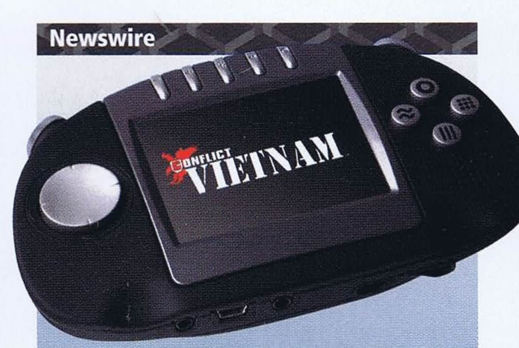
'This is the soccer-sim that you want, and with online play over Xbox Live, it's no longer purely for PS2 punters'

**Gradius V (PS2)** — E1, 9/10

'The biggest joy of *Gradius V* is that it's equally regressive and progressive. It's utterly and completely *now*, but also respectful of its elders'

**Pikmin 2 (GC)** — E2, 8/10

'While lacking the sort of elements required to win over a broad audience, *Pikmin 2* manages to satiate those in dire need of Nintendo innovation'




### Gizmondo in Conflict with SCi

Gizmondo manufacturer Tiger Telematics has announced a 12-game deal with SCi. Although no specific titles have yet been confirmed, Gizmondo will have access to SCi's back catalogue – which features titles such as the *Conflict* series, *Richard Burns Rally* and *Carmageddon* – as well as its future releases, which include film/comic tie-in *Constantine* and tactical action game *Battlestations: Midway*. Gizmondo, which launches in Australia and NZ in 2005, has been promising major game deals for some time, and this announcement dramatically increases the number of high-profile games available for the system. No information is currently available on how or if the SCi titles will take advantage of the Gizmondo's GPS and camera capabilities.

# DEVELOPER DIARY

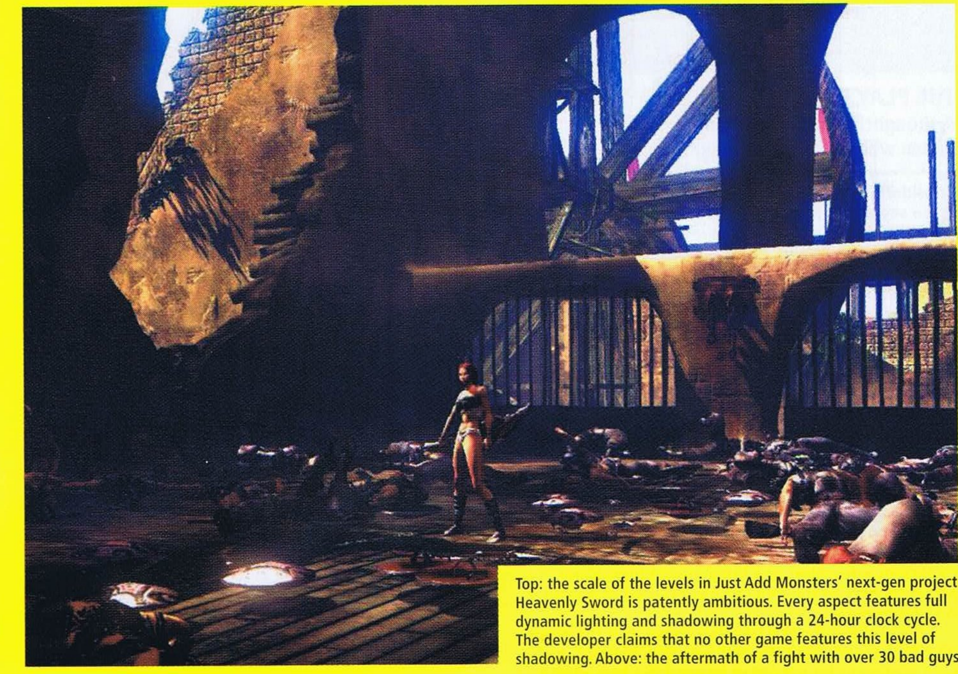
## Tameem Antoniades of Just Add Monsters begins his next-gen story…

It's March 2003 and I'm sat with some colleagues ready to hear Bungie talk *Halo* at GDC. Ed Fries, head of Microsoft Games Studios, comes up to us: "We've just had our first week's sales for *Kung Fu Chaos*. It's done 10,000 units." Ten-thousand units sounds crap to me. Ed, sensing our disdain, continues: "That's good for a week." I look at my colleagues. They all have a 10,000-units-sounds-crap expression on their faces.

Rewind to January 2003. We've just wrapped up *Kung Fu Chaos*, our first game at JAM. It was a smooth ride. The best development experience I've ever had. Nina, Mike and I founded JAM, scaling up from three people working from Mike's bedroom to 22 people delivering the game on time and on budget while exceeding all of the quality benchmarks set out by Microsoft. We didn't even have a crunch period. Contrary to popular opinion, everyone we worked with at MS was a passionate gamer who really knew what they were doing. The same couldn't be said for their marketing and PR people who were a bunch of… well, you get the idea.

It started when they showed an early build of *Kung Fu Chaos* to the most influential magazines and websites in the US without our knowledge. The game was untextured, had placeholder sound, no effects and the combat was only a rough implementation. From there it just got worse but I'm not going to go through the list of cock-ups because it drives me nuts just thinking about them. However, as the first reviews come in, things were looking up: 92 per cent; 4 out of 5; 9 out of 10; "One of the best games I've ever played" said Penny Arcade; then the US's biggest print magazine scores it 50 per cent. Scratch record. "I want to punch this game in the throat", they said as they took turns to bash it for being racist. Subsequent reviews also decide to take the moral high ground.

**Contrary to popular opinion, everyone at MS was a passionate gamer who really knew what they were doing. The same couldn't be said for their marketing and PR people…**



Top: the scale of the levels in Just Add Monsters' next-gen project Heavenly Sword is patently ambitious. Every aspect features full dynamic lighting and shadowing through a 24-hour clock cycle. The developer claims that no other game features this level of shadowing. Above: the aftermath of a fight with over 30 bad guys

A bunch of gaming magazines, newspapers and radio stations sent us mails to offer support and defend the game. The PR guys respond with: "Our goal is to make sure no one talks about this. If we stop them from writing about the game we win". So only those who think the game is racist are given a voice and the game is left to rot on the shelves with no marketing or PR support. Yet the message we get from MS is that they are interested in a sequel. Ever since we gave them a concept trailer for *Kung Fu Chaos*, MS have wanted developers to give them trailers to pre-visualise the games they are publishing. We start creating a design doc and a concept trailer for the sequel called *Kung Fu Story*. It's an amazing piece of work available to Edge readers at www.justaddmonsters.com/edge

Forward to GDC 2003 again. After hearing the sales figures we know that a sequel isn't going to happen even though MS is saying otherwise. Our options are looking grim. With no sequel in sight, we have two choices: create a brand new IP or do a work-for-hire gig. Our *Kung Fu Chaos* engine was really only suited to *Kung Fu Chaos*, and the cost of re-engineering it for a licence would mean that we wouldn't be able to compete with those who specialise in low-cost licences. Creating a new IP is looking grim too: our market research shows that sequels and licences dominate the end of a console cycle. Even if we pull off a new IP, the investment we would have to make on an updated engine would probably only last one game in the current stage of the console life cycle.

What our research does show is that while thirdperson action adventures are big, the first generation of games in this genre are always crap. Nina, Mike and I originally came from Sony Cambridge, a studio that specialised in thirdperson action games, and so we would be treading familiar ground. If we start now, a full year or two before most developers even think about next-gen development, we would have the time to craft a great game and release it early in the next-gen console cycle. Perhaps we could pull off a *Halo*.

As expected, several weeks after our presentation to MS, they say no to *Kung Fu Story*. We are already busy designing a next-generation original IP codenamed Heavenly Sword, and so begins this diary of the dreams and nightmares that define next-gen game development.

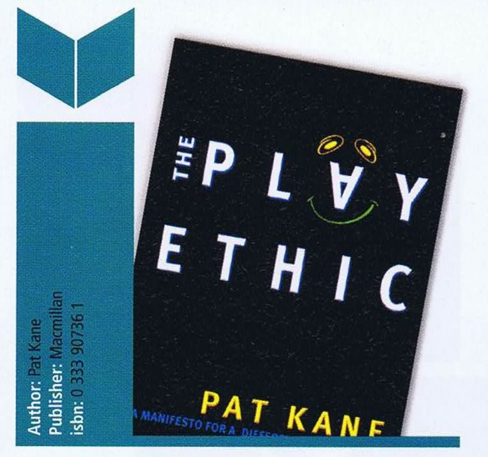
### Internet Game Of The Month

**Zoo Keeper**

jp.shockwave.com/games/puzzles/zookeeper/zookeeper.html

The gaming industry has never settled on a precise answer for when a 'tribute' to a game mechanic crosses the divide into copyright infringement. The fact remains, however, that finding familiar pleasures on a new format can be an enormous – if guilty – pleasure. The Shockwave preview for *Zoo Keeper*, Robot Communications' DS puzzle game, certainly owes a lot to a certain browser-based game which has popped caps into the pleasure centres of millions of bored office workers across the world, but it's hard to hold that against it. Not least because, somehow, this is *better*. Better balanced, better presented, it's somehow genuinely absorbing rather than coma-inducingly compulsive. The only frustration is knowing just how much better it would be with a touchscreen and a stylus.

That's not the end of the 'tributes', of course. One of the reasons that this game will make you happy is that it will remind you of the marvellous *Baku Baku Animal*. And if ever there was a game crying out for a DS conversion, that's it.



Author: Pat Kane
Publisher: Macmillan
isbn: 0 333 90736 1

## THE PLAY ETHIC

**A thoughtful look at modern life from a man who was once looking for Linda**

Considering Pat Kane's career path, he should have a lot to say about how play might fit within our post-modern miasma of work, leisure and the in-between. Starting out as half of 1980s Glaswegian proto-synth-popsters Hue And Cry, followed by a stint as Lord Rector of Glasgow University as well as being a co-founder of The Sunday Herald (UK) and a general talking head (now professional consultant), on all things meeja, he's certainly lead a charmed life. The background of how easily such an interesting existence was carved out isn't something Kane himself comments on.

It's probably fair to surmise, though, that despite his detestation of the very concept of the protestant work ethic, he's had to work hard to play so fine. And it is this which is the irony of the play ethic, which he posts as a 21st century theme in direct competition to Weber's working class schema. With the rise of individualism, and all that entails with respect to society, education and family groupings, Kane proposes play as the key definition of what it now is to be human.

It's nothing if not a utopian vision, but the more significant (and unanswered) question remains, can such a concept be extended beyond the thoughtful elite such as Kane to the odd-job call centre workers who are our equivalent of the old factory drones?

## Continue

**Bioshock**
System Shock 2's spiritual successor? Yes, please

**The power of ten**
Two years and 11 months of holding our breaths

**M64 DS minigames**
Faces and bombs! Faces and bombs!

## Quit

**Halo 2 leaks**
The wrong kind of global release plan

**Jack Thompson**
You're just not making any sense, man

**Exclusive review deals**
They don't actually help anyone, do they?

# INCOMING

The shock of the new

## Cold Fear

PC, PS2, Xbox/Ubisoft/March 2005



A fresh game from Darkworks, creator of the *Alone In The Dark* series, finds an intrepid US coastguard threatened by storm and horror on a Russian tanker and a desolate oil rig. Already showing a suitably Carpenter-like atmosphere

## Tsukiyoni Saraba

PS2/Taito/December (Japan), TBC (AU)



With an RPG-heavy staff including the director of the first two *Suikodens*, few were expecting Taito's new title to be a Matrix-styled gun-fu shooter. The hook is that the slow-mo is a necessity rather than a gimmick: bullets are instantly lethal

## Legend Of Zelda: The Minish Cap

GBA/Nintendo/November




Capcom won its *Zelda* spurs with the *Oracles* games, but there was always something a little lacking. *The Minish Cap*, which should be released at some point this month, looks set to add what the earlier games lacked: spark

## Ace Combat 5: Squadron Leader

PS2/Namco/Out now (US), Q1 2005 (AU)



Having seen US and Japanese release as *The Unsung War* by the time you read this, the latest in Namco's engaging aerial combat series introduces a new conflict, new planes and, for the first time, (optional) manual takeoffs and landings

## Imperator

PC/Mythic/2005



The *Dark Age Of Camelot* developer's alternate-future MMO – where the Roman Empire rules the Earth and the stars – continues to intrigue with a trickle of information and prototype (in-engine) shots of the futuristic capital's skyline

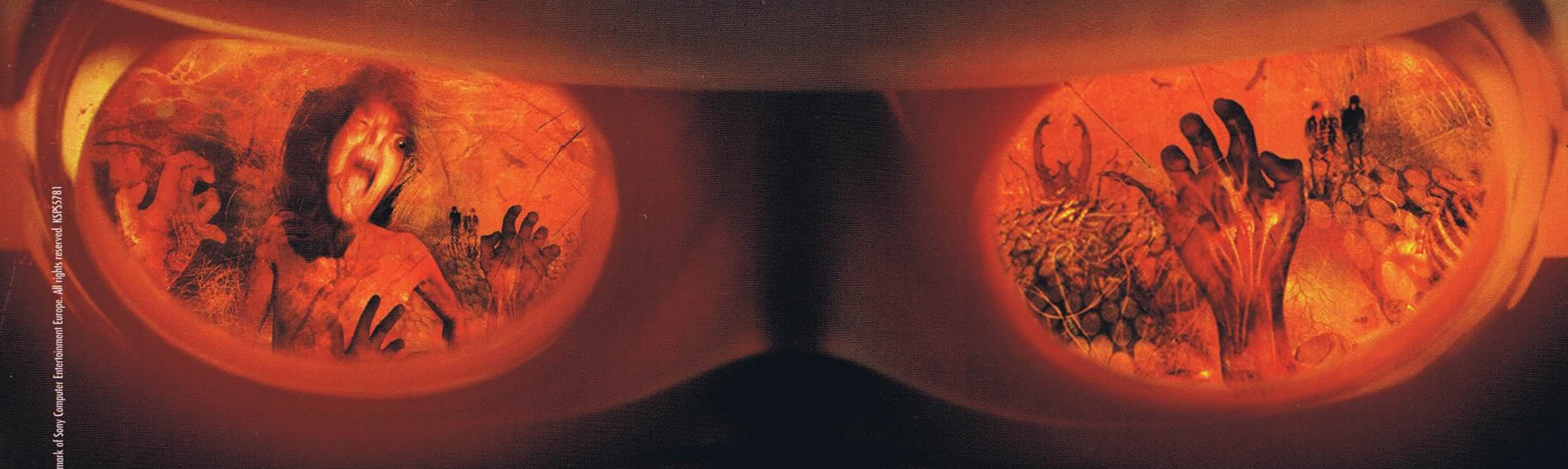
## King Kong

GC, PC, PS2, Xbox/Ubisoft/Q4 2005



Ubisoft has set up Michel Ancel (above, centre, with Peter Jackson and fellow Montpellier developers) to develop the film tie-in. Hopefully Ancel and co can inject it with the same vivacity as they did the late, lamented *Beyond Good And Evil*

they say the eyes are
the WINDOW to the Soul








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INTERVIEW

# Nintendo Juggernaught?

**Under whelming sales, a lack of true support from some retailers and a conflicting image can't seem to stop Nintendo of Australia's faith in their products and future**

Nintendo's rise in this country is a feel-good story; having started here with distribution through Mattel, the Japan-fathered business broke through with a strong presence through both the NES and SNES eras and maintained an image of consistent marketing prowess as well as proactive Australian presence. Consumers knew Nintendo of Australia existed, and that is how Nintendo of Australia wanted it. That is, however, until Sony took the crown from Nintendo as the market leader and put the N64 in its place. Certainly that particular console saw many successes in Australia, *Goldeneye* sold through over 300,000 units here – not a small figure by any console's standards. It's interesting then, Nintendo's current console has sold far less than the aforementioned title alone.

**"Nintendo, has never been a company to focus on the laurels of one game, Sony and Microsoft seem to do that..."**

The Gamecube has only managed to break 100,000 units so far, and is very uncomfortably trailing an aggressive Microsoft for a place in the Australian console race.

"We're not happy with the Gamecube's position in Australia," explains Rose Lappin, Director of Sales and Marketing at Nintendo of Australia. "But we have a lot of great games releasing this and next year."

Are 'great games' enough though? Clearly Nintendo of Australia's image, and indeed the image of the company on a worldwide level, still suffers a child-focused stamp. But as Lappin explains, maintaining a certain image is not the company's highest priority.

"At Nintendo, we focus on the best games possible," Lappin reveals succinctly. "Nintendo has never been a company to focus solely on the laurels of one game, Sony and Microsoft seem to do that, and a game like *Halo 2* is a bit of an anomaly in that consumers have been waiting a long time for that game, so the hype surrounding it has helped, but Nintendo focuses on the strengths of their brands."

It's arguable then, Nintendo's trademark aloof attitude, something they were renowned for during the SNES and N64 generations, is still in effect today, but Lappin grounds this idea with a stab at the Nintendo philosophy of innovation and quality.

"The Nintendo DS is so unique, we can't wait to get it in the hands of the consumer," she says excitedly. "Nintendo is the leader in the handheld market and now we've taken innovation to the next level."

Innovation is certainly a critical point in the face of gaming as a decaying art, but how will the DS translate to the average person on the street? According to Lappin an extensive marketing campaign that will "have people wanting to touch the system as soon as they can" is the first step, followed by developers running with the depths of their creativity on a system whose limitations are seemingly 'endless'.

However, while it is a tantalising system, the DS won't do anything to help the Gamecube here. Thankfully for Nintendo of Australia, a wave of quality gaming is on its way.

"The line up coming to the end of year and then into 2005 is incredible," Lappin chimes. "We have *Paper Mario 2*, *Pikmin 2*, *Tales of Symphonia*, *Metroid Prime 2* and then next year we have *Mario Tennis*, *Mario Party 6*, *Resident Evil 4* and, of course, the new *Zelda* game. So we feel the Gamecube, will have a lot to offer gamers before the next generation hits."

And any news of Nintendo's so called 'Revolution'? Lappin grins knowingly, "We're going to play with our cards held close to our chest for now, but rest assured we'll have some very exciting announcements in 2005."




After the E3 hype surrounding PSP, the portable gaming market was starting to look like an open and shut case. Now, post-redesign, it's the 'open and shut' case that's looking good









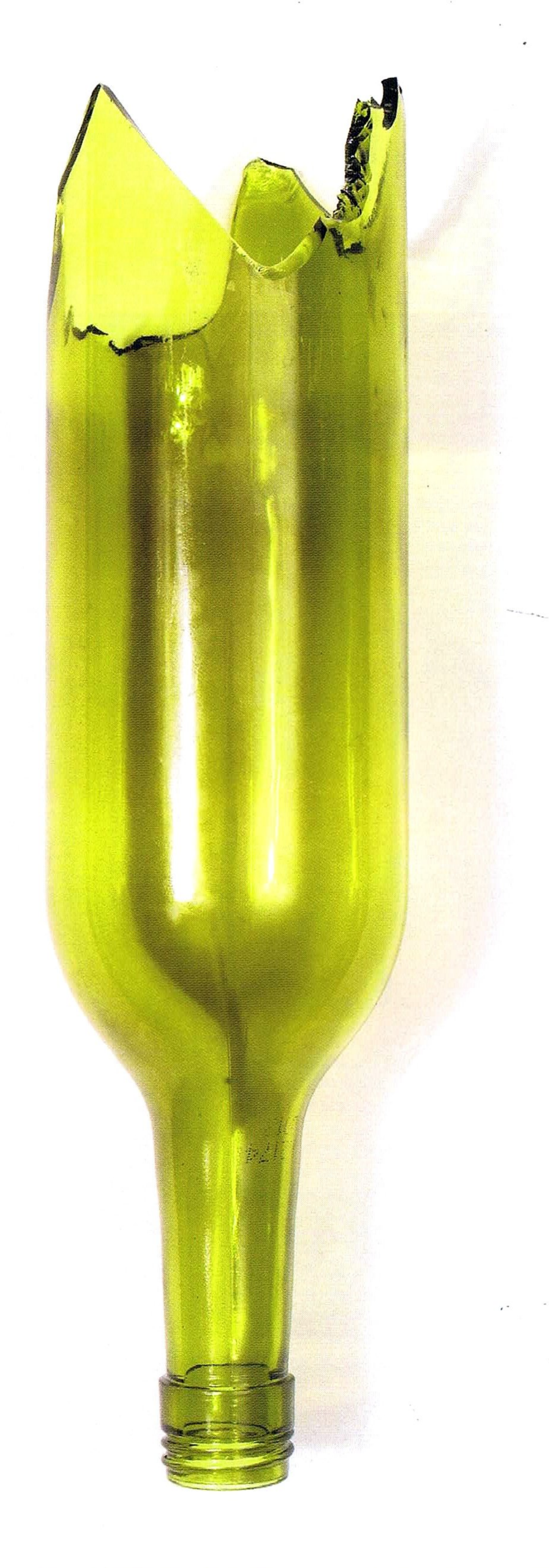












# CONVERSATION STARTER

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# Hype

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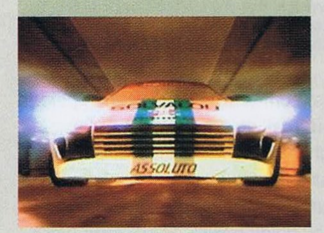
## Choice incoming cuts

### The Legend Of Zelda: The Minish Cap



A stolen hour with Link and his talking hat reveals that Capcom still has the sound understanding, deft touch and devilish imagination needed for a great *Zelda* game.
GBA (NINTENDO)

### New Ridge Racer



So it was *old* Ridge Racer – an *RRV* track given a widescreen makeover – but its unfinished state let the handling shine through. With almost nothing there save the powerslides, it was still enough.
PSP (NAMCO)

### Rise Of The Kasai



The methodical brutality of Rau's first outing was a lesson in patience that stood alone in a genre of lithe, supersonic acrobats. But that hasn't made the wait for his return, fall, and his sister's vengeance easier.
PS2 (SONY)

## Dishonour among thieves

### Can peer pressure stop piracy?



Halo 2: out there now, if you want it. But what about that special smell of fresh instruction manual?

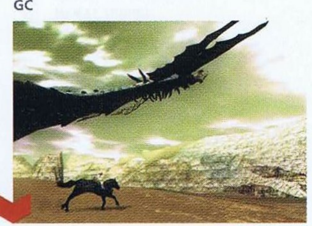
A few hours into the leak, the conspiracy-theory race was fast becoming as compelling a game as *Halo 2* itself ought to be. "It's a real leak!" "No, it's not, the file is fake!" "No, it's real but it'll crash and then corrupt your hard drive!" "No, it won't, that was a lie Microsoft came up with in a panic to stop people downloading it!" "But it was Microsoft that leaked it in the first place, as a publicity stunt!" "No, they didn't, it was the French! It was definitely the French!" What, all of them?

The feeding frenzy makes Bungie's 'I love bees' viral marketing campaign all the more apt: *Halo 2* is one of the biggest honeypots of all time, and it's little surprise that so many inquisitive gamers have flocked to the news that the lid's been left ajar. The debate will rage about how much harm it's doing ("None! I'll still buy the game on release!" versus "All piracy is theft!"), but it's hard to construct an argument that says it's a good thing. If the leak proves stable, then Microsoft will lose sales and Bungie's endless efforts to protect the details of the singleplayer story will be spiked by every gaming site on the internet. Even if it were a publicity stunt, it would be a misguided one, making the industry look incompetent and criminalised. Whatever your stance on leaks, they're going to continue. *Halo 2*'s leak shows that technical arms races, legal judgments and quarantined review code can't stop them. You can.

In a peer-to-peer world, the old excuse of trying before buying is no longer a water-tight defence. No matter how pure your intentions are of buying the product you've downloaded, you can't police the actions of those who pirate it from you. There's no distinction between a user and a supplier any more, no moral cracks to hide in. But equally, in a peer-to-peer world, you can oppose piracy without lifting a finger – by literally not lifting a finger. Don't click on the download link, and you strangle the supply by one tiny degree. And then let the debate rage about how much good that can do, secure in the knowledge of how impossible it is to construct an argument that says it's a bad thing.




26 **Resident Evil 4**
GC



30 **Ico 2**
PS2



32 **The Bard's Tale**
PS2, XBOX



35 **Shining Tears**
PS2



36 **Metal Gear Acid**
PSP



36 **Rengoku**
PSP



37 **Prince of Persia: Warrior Within**
PS2, XBOX, PC, GC

FORMAT: **GC**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2005**

# Resident Evil 4

## Capcom squares up to one of the most terrifying challenges facing survival horror – handing control back to the player







### Blood bank

**Curiously, money can now be picked up, from inside smashed boxes and from the corpses of fallen enemies, meaning that *Resident Evil* now has an economy, too. Items and weapon upgrades can be bought, while dirty items can be cleaned to increase their resale value. This introduction of currency also means that more effective play – conserving ammo, exploring and culling the maximum number of enemies – is rewarded. It makes a pleasant change from the typical speed-runs and playing-without-saving that the *RE* games usually take as a measure of skill and achievement.**

It must be scary for Shinji Mikami, director of *Resident Evil 4*, perhaps scarier than any of his past *Resident Evil* games have ever managed to be. Back in 1996, the first *Resident Evil* coined the survival-horror genre and, in the eyes of many, defined it. It's a genre that has steadfastly relied on a prerendered premise – pristine but static environments, fixed camera angles and clumsy, sticky controls to unease the player as much as any amount of splatter horror and audio-visual atmosphere.

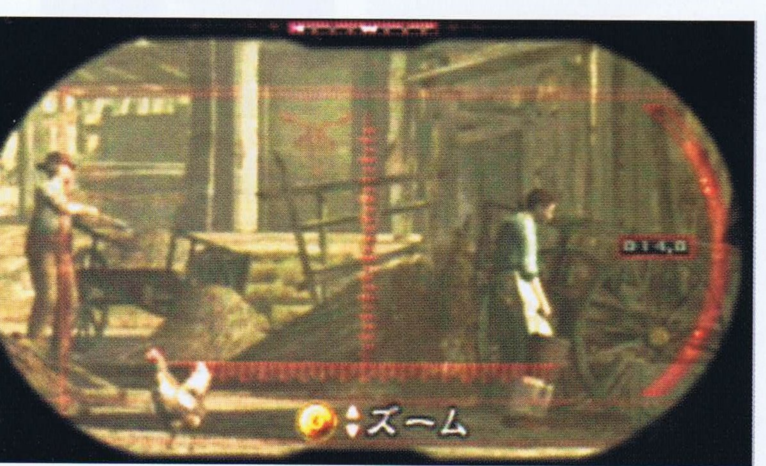
The series has seen prequels, side-stories and updates that, while gaining a mixed reception among established fans, refused to step far enough away from the formula to enrapture a new audience. It's almost as if *Resident Evil* has become hesitant to face up to the necessary evil of change, paralysed by the knowledge that ironing out any of the problems of the sore, stuttered action will take it beyond the established boundaries of survival horror and into the well-trodden territory of thirdperson action, with the added challenge of having to scare a player who's no longer bolted into a ghost train of preconceived, on-rails thrills and is now free to trample all over any sense of dramatic tension. But it's a challenge that *Resident Evil 4* is meeting head on, and successfully so, with not a hint of identity crisis in sight.

The camera is now fixed in an effective tracking manner, positioned snugly behind the lead character's right shoulder, essentially giving the player freedom to look wherever they want, whenever they want. Twin-stick control isn't fully implemented, however, as the right stick allows lead character Leon Kennedy to flick his view upwards or down at the ground but nothing more. Aiming your weapon is a similarly gummy mix of conditional restriction; holding the R-trigger puts you into a free-look mode, firing your laser-sighted pistol wherever, but prevents your character from moving. This may seem like a half-hearted progression next to the twin-stick grace of a more typical thirdperson shooter but, in practice, these compromises come across as more of a happy medium between fluid play and the sensation of danger that comes from being so hampered, but without making the player feel like they're fighting an undead control system as much as a relentless, deadly enemy. A quick-turn function is also available, activated by holding back on the stick while pressing the run button. This newfound freedom to aim precisely is made all the more affecting and powerful thanks to enemies, such as the villagers of the opening section, who respond acutely to being shot, reeling and staggering and clutching desperately at their opened throats. Lining up headshots on a downed and temporarily static enemy is as much a priority as taking potshots at whatever pitchfork-wielding housewife has just managed to get within eye-stabbing range of Leon. These villagers are a magnificently creepy mix of human and inhuman, not so much the walking dead

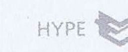


**Boxes can be smashed open to reveal supplies and ammo, but it's an oversight that you can't just crack them with the butt of your handgun, say, instead having to waste a bullet or switch to a short-range melee weapon**

> You can shoot any projectiles out of the air, or put a bullet in someone's hand to disarm them, such is the scope of combat, making gunplay considered target practice




**You've now access to a set of binoculars; it's almost guilty voyeurism for a game series that until now has always forced the player to watch the action from a series of cramped, predetermined angles**





Very early on in the game, you'll stumble across a dog with its leg caught in a bear trap; shooting the trap will free it, with the dog bounding away. It's a move that's mooted to help out the player later in the game, with the dog rumoured to be a kind of sidekick



as the strafing dead and the jogging dead. They approach cautiously but inevitably, moving with more intelligence than the singular, strength-in-numbers conga-line tactic expected of zombie hordes, throwing whatever comes to hand and fanning out slightly in order to get an optimal chance of hacking a chunk out of your face. Fortunately, you can always simply shoot any projectiles out of the air, or put a bullet in someone's hand to disarm them, such is the scope of the combat system. This all makes the gunplay feel more like considered target practice instead of an out-and-out shooting range.

The opening stage, set in a pastoral but nonetheless unsettling village, sets an excellent tone for the game, dropping the player off into a set-piece through which they have to carve their own path – shooting out windows and climbing on to rooftops, all the while being pursued by an enemy capable of clambering up behind you and firebombing you out of any cubby-hole you try to dig yourself into – instead of being shepherded from one tight corridor to the next. Later stages keep up the feeling of an organic world, both in terms of possible courses of action and imminent threat. The docks, for example, feature a number of walkways which provide little respite, considering that enemies will happily wade through waist-high water to claw at you from all directions. Caves are filled with oil lamps that can be shot out to provide an explosion – and they may also reveal an item you just couldn't see before in the glare.

Other changes point to a more accessible, useful system of play. Your energy bar is now displayed on-screen, instead of being defiantly and irritatingly tucked away on a menu screen. And your inventory is more forgiving, allowing for a large number of items based on how many blocks they take up, meaning no more typical *Resident Evil* dimensional oddities where a key can take up as much of your pocket as a handgun. Maybe they're reluctant concessions, but they're warmly welcome all the same. And they, as much as anything else, point to the fact that *Resident Evil 4* is, as scary as it sounds, definitely on track to prove the old maxim about a change being as good as a rest.

Grenades prove to be as practical to use as they are potent. The shotgun makes a triumphant return, too, in what is possibly its most shockingly effective videogame form yet, punching a bloody path through screens thick with enemies





If a number of enemies get a little too close for comfort, Leon can let loose with a spinning kick that sends them all tumbling, giving him some breathing space to escape

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SCE**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (SCEI)**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2005**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E2**

# Ico 2

## Back in the saddle for a closer look at perhaps the most visually arresting PS2 game ever conceived

We'd already given a cover story to the next *Ico* game (a moniker SCEE is keen to maintain for the western release, rather than the literal translation of its native *Wanda To Kyozo*), but it would have been impolite to pass up another opportunity to speak with **Fumito Ueda** and (an introspectively quiet) **Kenji Kaido**. Not just impolite, but impossible: as much as the game's fabulous mystery deserves to be unspoiled by forewarning, it's that same mystery – those towering creatures of pelt and sinew and ancient stone – that leaves us so insatiably curious.



**Why *Wanda To Kyozo*?**
Wanda is the name of the hero. Kyozo would mean Colossus in English. So the game title [translated] is *Wanda And Colossus*. I thought *Ico* was perhaps too abstract, so this time I wanted something simpler, easier to understand. Now, from a Japanese perspective, I think it is more appealing, in addition to being easier to understand. It shocks people's ears.



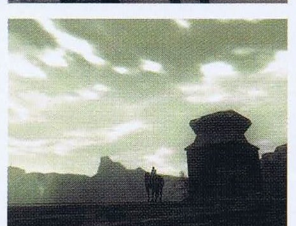
**How do you intend to let the new game's storyline unfold?**
I can't explain the scenario in detail, but it is about a young man who brings a girl who has lost her soul to a long-forgotten place, where it is said she can regain her soul. He is guided by a sort of divine voice, which explains to him that he must awaken the colossi and defeat all of them to succeed. We are designing a strange language, different from *Ico's*, to keep this mythical feeling about the game's world. There will be subtitles to understand the dialogue. Some questions we will not provide any answers to, even at the end of the game, like *Ico*. For example, you will have no explanation about why the girl lost her soul. We want players to imagine the reason behind some elements of the story. But you will learn about the nature of the colossus and their place in that world at the end.

> "The situation changes, so progression on his enemy's body will be hard for the hero. Hairs offer the best grip but other surfaces can be slippery, or even offer no grip"

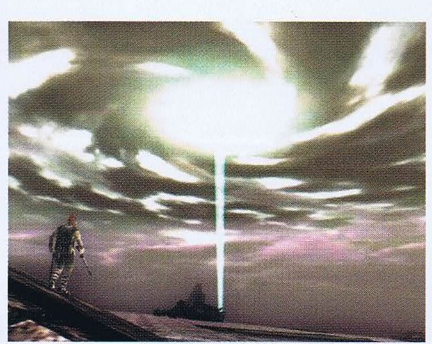
**Though you don't intend the game to be a continuation of *Ico*, it does echo the visual style. Did you at any point consider starting over with a completely new visual approach?**
We researched various styles, but nothing actually satisfied us. Our choice to deliver something close to *Ico* was motivated by the fact that it is still today very original and could be developed in another way. *Ico* was filled with light, but *Wanda* is more terrestrial – closer to earth.

**Have you determined how many the player will encounter during the game?**
At the moment we have around 20, in various forms. Some are bipeds while others fly, live in water, and so on. According to our designs, the game should last for an average of ten hours. But this time we want to provide enough bonuses to motivate players to play it several times, much more than *Ico*.

**Can you explain how Wanda works in concert with his horse?**
His horse, Argo, is a very important partner. Since colossi come in various shapes, he will need his horse's speed and mobility to study his opponent's movements or even just catch up with it. There are many actions both 'characters' can perform together: the hero

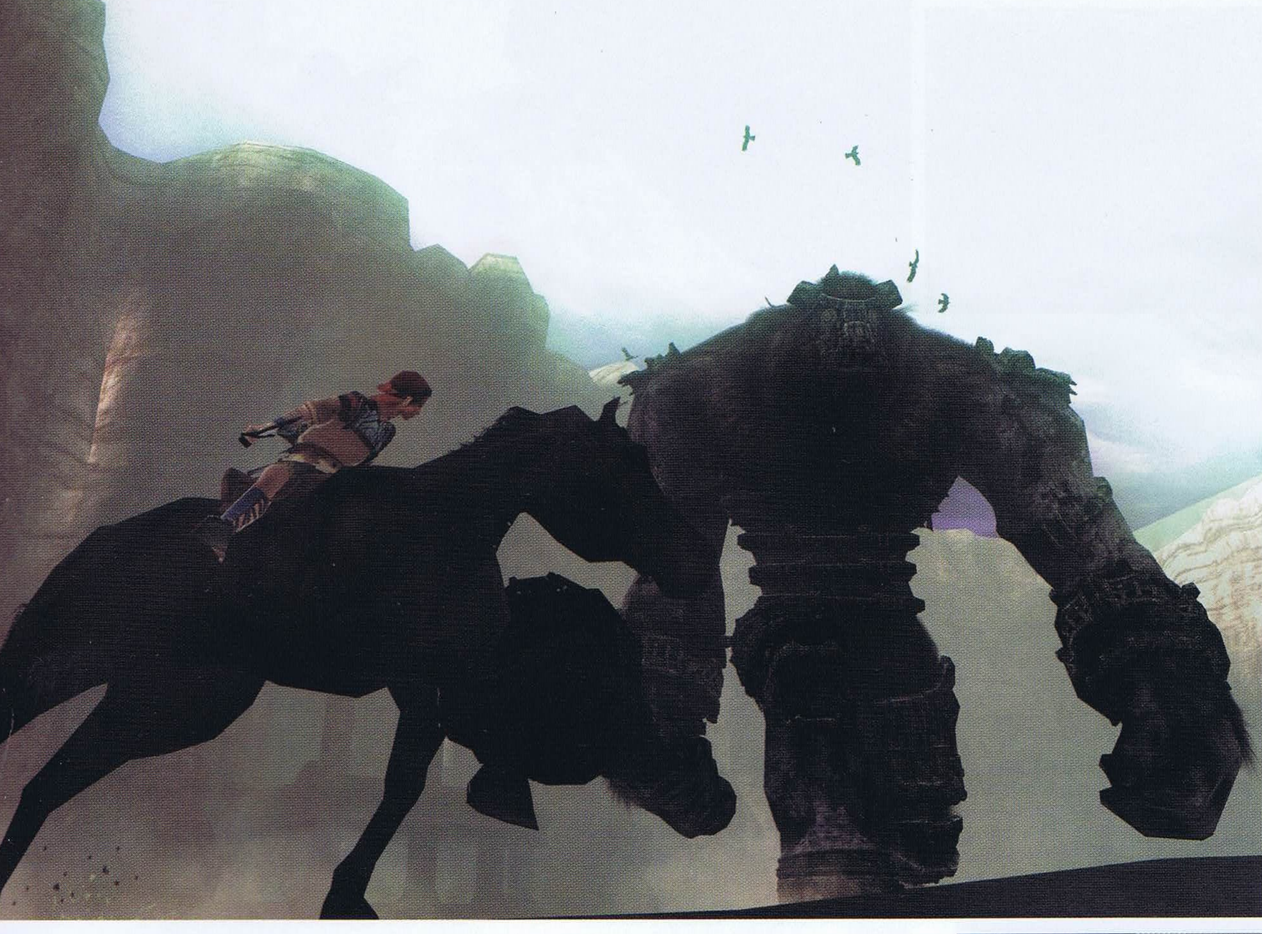


One dreamscape features a reinterpretation of the impossibly long aqueduct (right) seen in the team's 2002 recruitment advertisement. It's been a gruelling wait for fans



This impressive phenomenon is perhaps a less subtle means of communication from the 'divine voice' overseeing Wanda's quest, though the colossi are hardly inconspicuous beasts





The colossi amaze not just with their scale, but in their recollection of the rigorous architecture of Ico's castle, as if it had risen from its haunches and marched inland





can stand on his horse's back and jump, for instance. We are particularly proud of the horse animation.

I think the animation of the character is worth attention, too – he can perform an incredible variety of movements according to his situation.

**Is that entirely situation-based, or will he learn new skills, or the ability to use new equipment over the course of the game's duration?**
It is not a roleplaying game, so he will not have an inventory or new equipment to acquire. However, he will gain some kind of experience, improving his parameters. I can't talk definitively on this yet, but he may actually change slightly in appearance in some way, due to these improvements.



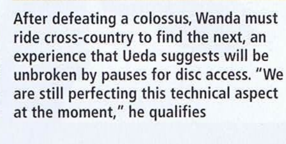
On falling: "What will happen depends on the altitude, but most of the time he will be hurt – you will see in the way he impacts on the ground. After he falls several times, he will be wounded and find it difficult to move"

**Considering some players found the combat in *Ico* too difficult, is there a concern that the concept of scaling a colossus may be too overwhelming, or even frustrating?**
We are testing this key feature of the game, and I believe we have found the right balance so it will not be that difficult, letting the player focus on understanding each colossus' body's configuration and nature. Of course, you will fall many times as you challenge the enemy's body. But when you get a good knowledge of its configuration and especially the locations of its weaknesses, then you will go for it. I think the first exploration is challenging, but it will not be a barrier for the game experience.

That's what we're working to achieve, and when we perfect it, I think the game will be successful.

**What would you say your greatest achievement is with the game so far?**
It is definitely the way we managed to animate the surface on the colossus' body. As it moves, like any living being, its hide distorts and extends. This represents one of the game's main challenges for the player – it is like the levels are constantly evolving. The situation is always changing, so progression on his enemy's body will be hard for the hero. Hairs offer the best grip but other surfaces can be slippery, or even offer no grip. In addition, there are obstacles, these sort of 'accessories' the colossus wears.





After defeating a colossus, Wanda must ride cross-country to find the next, an experience that Ueda suggests will be unbroken by pauses for disc access. "We are still perfecting this technical aspect at the moment," he qualifies

And, finally, the colossus will not let the hero climb freely on its body – it will try to dislodge him, adding to the stage's difficulty. Now, you may have a very active colossus so the game will be very much action-oriented. Others may be more peaceful, but just moving around the body will require a lot of thinking. This tactical aspect is not just limited to the body configuration: the environment is another key component. Its shape provides access points to certain forms of colossus. Higher ground combined with the use of the horse will give a jumping point to catch a flying colossus. Bringing another colossus to a certain location might limit its mobility. We are thinking about this kind of uses of the environment to amplify the importance of the horse, and also provide more depth to the game. But the body animation and the vast landscapes are the biggest challenges we are facing in development right now.



Director Fumito Ueda and producer Kenji Kaido at the Manhattan Hotel during TGS



FORMAT: **PC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **THQ**
DEVELOPER: **INXILE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **FEBRUARY**

# The Bard's Tale

## Sharp swords, sharper tongues, damsels in distress and the voice of Cary Elwes – the western RPG gets the Princess Bride treatment

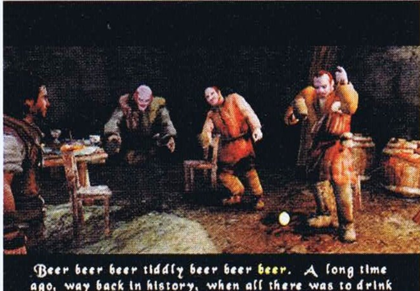
Conversation branches offer the choice of a sarcastic or, well, cheerfully sarcastic response. The delight, apart from the wordplay, is in the unexpected consequences

The remake is a tricky business, considering that so much of what builds a game's mythology is an entirely personal reaction: endless budget and development talent can't re-imagine a player's imagination. This second life for *The Bard's Tale* concerns itself with the fact that players *enjoyed* playing the original – a game that is, amusingly, now older than a sizeable chunk of the people who play on current gaming consoles – and sets out to make players enjoy it again.

That it recounts a new story isn't the surprise so much as how the telling's changed – if the 1985 game was read in a monotone from a D&D rulebook, the 2004 game is recounted with folksy, wry insight from that same rulebook, now annotated with 20 years of observations, anecdotes and strike-throughs. It's a light-hearted outlook backed up by one of the most convincing efforts yet to balance both sides of the action-RPG label. For all that's changed, there's one aspect that rings familiar from its heritage: the difficulty. Venture into a new area and the map seethes with angry red markers; come across a save point and it's as likely a grim omen of imminent ambush as a convenience. Charging into the fray with the expectation that you can stab down foes as quickly as you can stab the attack button soon reveals that even a single enemy can block and counterattack with murderous speed, and in numbers they're overwhelming. The Bard's own ability to block lasts only for the crucial moment of impact, so there's no hunkering down to deflect all comers.

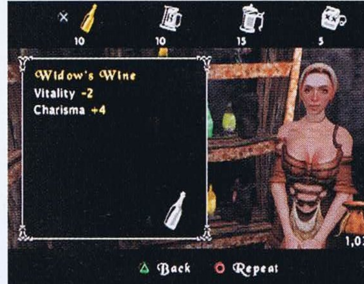
Instead, *The Bard's Tale* asks you to relearn those old rules of picking your openings, choosing your ground and managing your party (even when initially that party will consist of a crawling bolt of electricity and a small but enthusiastic dog), but this time without the safety net of a turn-based environment. Barking orders at your companions with the D-pad allows you to set up ambushes, valiant stands and less-valiant retreats as the situation requires. As your set-list of summoning songs grows, so do the possibilities for combat, with each would-be party member bringing its own talent: the Thunder Spider can shock enemies senseless, the Heroine's crossbow can batter them back in their tracks, the Mercenary can make leering advances at passing townswomen.

Not to be outdone, the Bard also gains regular choices of combat specialisation with




The forgotten art of RPG singalongs – come back Alternate Reality, all is forgiven – is reprised with The Bard's Tale's musical moments. They're not profound, but they are catchy






Potions and scrolls are for teetotallers: The Bard's Tale offers stat-boosting liquors. They must be imbibed on the premises, ensuring your travels accommodate regular pub crawls





Your companions' icons indicate their health level. Unlike the Bard, they do not naturally recover, so it's often easiest to dismiss and resummon them in the lull between battles – if there is a lull. Attempting to summon in a fight is risky at best

his levelling, providing a sense even early in the game that his skills are slowly catching up with his inflated self-image. And the decision to forego an inventory – equipment is either immediately useful or money in the Bard's purse – simplifies rather than trivialises the issue of ensuring his gear passes muster.

But with even the best-laid battle plans occasionally prone to disaster, combat may seem too sadistically reminiscent of hours spent reloading from 5.25-inch floppies or, as a more recent point of reference, that first boss fight of *Ninja Gaiden*. As with both examples, though, there's a reason to press on, and it's that *The Bard's Tale* shows every sign of being a smart, involving RPG. That couldn't be taken for granted: a game that thumbs its nose at its own genre has more to risk than failing to raise a knowing smile.

There are no shortages of knowing smiles, but they're the product of an obvious care for the RPG as much as from exasperation with its neurotic adherence to cliché. It's the same care that's been lavished on the art design, with personable character models and a vividly lush wilderness. And it's the same care that finds subtitles switched off by default to let the voice acting tell the story – even if some accents drift through the Hebrides to unknown destinations during the course of a conversation. This overall solidity keeps the moments of unadulterated absurdist humour from jarring, and alternately doesn't leave you waiting for a punchline when the darker overarching storyline makes its presence felt.

The seeming contradictions don't stop there: although it's narrating an inevitable story from foreshadowed end to beginning to end again, you can sense the path branching with each encounter. It keeps its self-described 'Olde School' sensibilities close

**InXile wanted to make a game with personality – and it's as ambiguous, eccentric and brashly confident a personality as you could hope for**

(allowing access to an area far in advance of your ability to survive it seems a nod to players who would attempt *Wasteland*'s high-level Citadel as early as possible), yet shows a real appreciation of how times, and games, have changed. It's fun without the jokes, but the jokes make the game fun.

Perhaps the explanation is in the design brief. InXile wanted to make a game with personality – and it's as ambiguous, eccentric and brashly confident a personality as you could hope for. For those who prefer their entertainment to keep its thoughts to itself, this could be *The Bard's Tale*'s undoing. For others, though, it looks set to be the life of the adventuring party.

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **PRODUCTION STUDIO 1**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2005**

# Devil May Cry 3

## Last year, it seemed the only developer unable to imitate Devil May Cry was Capcom. But third time's the charm






The early enemies – chiefly three breeds of mummified reapers – feature neat incidental detail, with billowing capes to rival Dante's overcoat. They're also noticeably smarter than previous thugs

**D***MC3* is the kind of action game that would pause to preen itself in front of a mirror during a gunfight: in fact, it wouldn't be surprising to catch the game's young and hungry Dante doing just that as he whoops and pouts his way through his debut devil-hunting performance. There's a winning lack of self-consciousness to its style – or 'stylish crazy action', to use the proper invented term – careening as it does between camp, cheese and music-video cool with machinegun rapidity.

An apparent unspoken rule of *DMC3* previews is to open with a scathing dismissal of the rushed second title – but it's obvious that the new game owes much to Tsuyoshi Tanaka's (unfulfilled) vision for *DMC2*, playing up environmental gymnastics and contortionist gunplay. Where *DMC2* stumbled with languid level design and hesitant enemies, though, *DMC3*'s opening moments share the boisterous confidence of their hero: a brawl inside a Renaissance-décor pole-dancing club proves as endlessly replayable as the original game's encounter with the Blades outside the coliseum.

And yet the revelation is the way the game's fighting styles supplement rather than replace Dante's familiar moveset, which remains constantly available. Thus players able to reel off Stinger-to-High-Time combos on muscle memory alone can dedicate their circle button to Trickster speed dashes and wall runs (though triggering the latter can be awkward). Swordmaster, meanwhile, is almost a misnomer, as in addition to rapid blade attacks it reprises the ability of *DMC2*'s secret character to toss your sword into an unfortunate foe and fight fist and boot until retrieving it. It's Gunslinger that convincingly steals the show, though, with immediately accessible, wildly showy dual aiming and a whipcracking shotgun special attack as iconic as the first title's pistol juggle.




Volatile enemies and, better yet, barrels feature in the city streets. The resulting inferno is the only point that DMC3's engine is forced to catch its breath and drop a frame or two







In a departure for the series, DMC3's camera is notably well-behaved, and tweakable with the right analogue stick

Still absent is the Royal Guard unarmed combat style, rendered even more tantalising by the presence of *Street Fighter 3* and *Alpha*'s Kenji Itsuno as game director – Guardsman Dante is said to throw what looks suspiciously like a dragon punch. With Swordmaster and Gunslinger styles intended to adapt to each new weapon, and presumably more style-agnostic upgrades in store, the combat system could hardly be more promising. The question, as always, is whether the game can continue as it has so convincingly begun – and though it's hardly a series for the quiet approach, Capcom has remained coy on practically every aspect.

But the reassuringly lengthy development time – even the recent delay has been a backhanded relief – suggests the wait is best spent guessing who of Dante's shock-haired, katana-wielding brother Vergil or the game's nameless femme fatale will guest as unlockable characters. There's one question that can at least be answered: whether Dante can still hold his own in a genre that has taken so many evolutionary leaps since his arrival. On current form, it seems his 15 bullets of fame are far from up.







The style meter now indicates how long you can afford to be uncool before dropping down a rank. Achieving S-rank swank requires Dante's full repertoire: in DMC3's style book, repeating the same attack is so two games ago

In addition to elven archer Elwing (top right image ), allies include a pink-clad catgirl ninja and a werewolf specialising in close-quarters combat – which should at least keep cooperative mode fresh, should the singleplayer AI be less adaptive








FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **TBC**



*Shining Tears* remains stubbornly, or hearteningly, in thrall to the effects that defined Sega's 16bit era – rampaging quarter-screen sprites and a warping background heralds triple-digit damage for unfortunates caught in a super attack

# Shining Tears

## The force is still strong with Sega's superdeformed sprites as they prepare for another outing on PS2

With the recently released GBA reworking of the original Mega Drive game and two new PS2 episodes, it's been a renaissance year for Sega's *Shining Force* series. Playable at TGS, *Shining Tears* was presented as a 'Tag Battle RPG' – newfangled talk for a surprisingly intense cooperative hack 'n' slash, as it turned out.

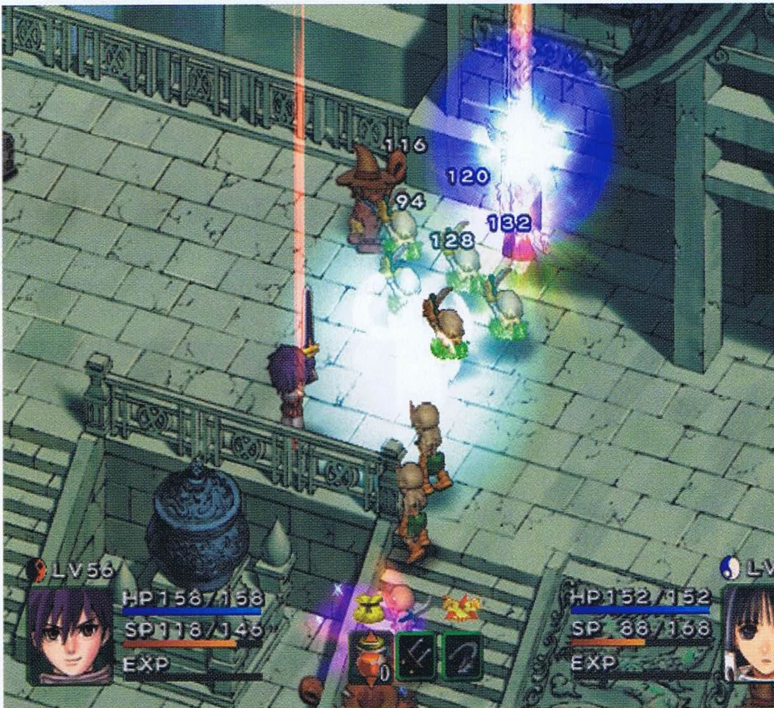
Your base of operations is a besieged city, with the majority of the game's missions involving defending it against overwhelming, but underskilled, enemy assault. It's also possible to venture outside of the walls and attempt 'Free Missions' in order to level-up and keep your characters in fighting form for the main game. Whether story-based or experience-gathering, missions consist of battles against large groups of enemies – screen-cloudingly large groups, taking full advantage of the 2D sprite presentation – which, in typical *Dynasty Warriors* style, can be either cut down in droves or routed by defeating their leader.

Though *Tears* has a single playable hero, Xion, he will always enter combat with a partner, chosen from available allies between missions: this choice affects the storyline and Xion's in-game abilities. In possession of both a light and dark soul, his alignment (and powers) will shift depending on his current partner's soul type. Each partner also provides beneficial effects to actions or statistics – and, generously, if you discover mid-mission that your chosen team skillset is unsuitable, it's possible to return to town and swap in a new character.

In singleplayer mode, your chosen partner fights under AI control, but can be shepherded with the right analogue stick if necessary. Holding R1 will instruct them to stand their ground, and in this state a magic attack can be released into the area between the two characters – presumably with a larger area inflicting less overall damage. Twoplayer gives complete control of the partner to the second combatant, and tandem attacks must be triggered in concert.

Defeating enemies during the course of a mission earns Status and Skill points, in addition to a bonus at its conclusion dependent on your ranking and fighting style. This bonus can be used to upgrade characters that sat out the mission, hopefully avoiding the common pitfall of less-used characters falling far behind the leaders in their advancement.

Though set for a North American release in 2005, *Tears*' superdeformed sprites and hand-drawn backgrounds will be clashing swords with the rendered splendour of *Dark Alliance*'s extended family: the *Shining* name may have a fight on its hands before it can reclaim its place in western hearts and living rooms.




*Tears*' 2D visuals are some of the sharpest on the PS2 to date, with impressive background detail ranging from practically painted outdoor scenes to the fine linework of man-made structures. Combat effects are showier, breaking with the straight-from-manga style



FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **KONAMI**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (KCEJ)**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **TBC**

# Metal Gear Acid

## The portable Solid Snake addresses the PSP's dearth of card battles, strategy and philosophical ramblings in one fell swoop









It wouldn't be a Metal Gear without protracted talking heads sequences, and Acid doesn't – or perhaps does – disappoint in this respect. Harried showgoers were desperately button-mashing through these lengthy dialogues

Despite some fair warning that *Acid* would be a considerably slower take on *Metal Gear* than its console, and even handheld, sister titles, many TGS attendees were obviously surprised by the playable article. With a feel that's decidedly *Front Mission* – aptly so, with the producer of Konami's '60s mech combat title *Ring Of Red* overseeing the project – crossed with a trading card game, *Acid*'s action is delivered in carefully measured doses.

Snake now operates in a turn-based environment, which can be rotated to cardinal points with the shoulder buttons or freely with the analogue disc. At the beginning of each turn, the player is given a quota of action points and a hand of cards; each card features a cost to play and a movement point bonus. One card can be discarded to boost Snake's movement range, within which he can sneak, crawl or sidle along walls in familiar style.

It's the enemy turn where *Acid*'s genre switch becomes most apparent: should Snake be discovered, direct firefights prove as dangerous as ever, but with the added vulnerability of running out of action points to respond with. And where *MGS* players could take advantage of their freedom and the AI's limitations to escape from an unfavourable situation, *Acid*'s tight ruleset brutally levels the playing field.




The playable version's GUI was no-frills compared to the MGS-style overlay previously shown: the current version may be placeholder or a concession to PSP hardware

Though an interesting experiment in bringing a new skew to the series, it's perhaps misplaced: the PlayStation generation has grown accustomed to Snake as an action hero, not an action figure. More patient early adopters, however, may be pleased to find an early PSP title that's more than a port of its forebears.

# Rengoku: The Tower Of Purgatory

## Is it the concept of a rise of the robots that has kept attention away from Hudson's grim-themed arcade-action PSP RPG?

FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **HUDSON**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **TBC**



It's unclear if the tower's levels will be randomly generated – such a feature would certainly be a boon for replay in Rengoku's gunslinging dungeon crawl

Hudson's first PSP title has been a dark horse throughout the machine's pre-launch hype swell, despite looking as striking (and, perhaps more significantly, as solid) now as it did in the E3 demo reel. Drawing on Dante's Divine Comedy for its theme – the coolly mechanical art design suggesting Hudson is taking the source material more seriously than, say, *Devil May Cry* – the game's protagonist is a warrior android, ADAM, who must scale the eight levels of the titular tower in search of a reason to exist.

Standing in the way of his ascent are 200 of his fellow androids, all with a far less philosophical outlook on their being. Defeating each in combat will earn new weapons, equipment and evolve ADAM's 'core', which appears to be a standard set of RPG statistics. Though ADAM cannot be killed, mortal damage will cause a 'reset', costing him his new attributes and equipment – which sounds like a fate worse than death, recalling the loss of a fully powered ship in an arcade shooter.

But in a similar fashion to that disastrous scenario, it may be possible to claw back ADAM's upgrades with some deft combat skills, as *Rengoku* plays much like a standard thirdperson action title – with all the dodging and weaving that entails. Combat is pleasingly responsive and rapid, so much so that Hudson intends to implement an up-to-16-player deathmatch mode. However, Sony's tardiness to provide support for the PSP's wireless functionality could result in *Rengoku* being delayed from its current 'year-end' release or, more ominously, the feature being dropped altogether.

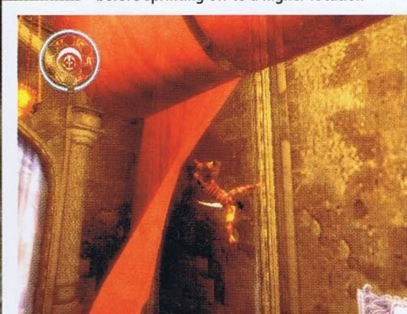


Rengoku's androids are literally armed to the teeth: weapons can be mounted in their heads, as well as on both arms (which can accept guns or blades) and a leg. Each weapon mount corresponds to a PSP face button





The Prince can now abseil down curtains, allowing him to end his wall runs with a graceful slide down to the ground. They can also be used as makeshift ropes, allowing him to run back and forth along the wall in an arc before sprinting off to a higher location



FORMAT: **PS2, XBOX, PC, GC**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **DECEMBER 2**

# Prince Of Persia: The Warrior Within

## Like an acrobat outta hell, the Prince Of Persia becomes the Prince Of Darkness. But will POP's bubble burst?

The atmosphere has completely changed. *The Sands Of Time* was a literal sandcastle, a game world that shimmered with gold and blue, but now everything in *The Warrior Within* is infused, choked even, with smoke and dust.

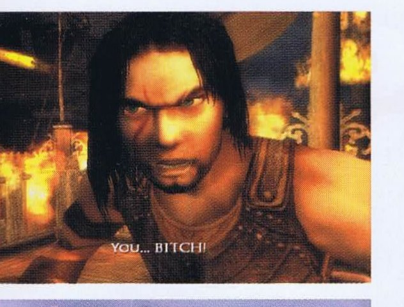
The world that the Prince scours in his desperate battle to escape death – his fated punishment for unleashing the sands of time in the original – is a gloomy and gritty one, but still remains far more striking than the usual washed-out and under-developed videogame look that such descriptions often suggest. Everything has been smudged with doom and shadow, from the towering and ruined architecture to the Prince himself. It's this shift in the Prince's demeanour that is perhaps the least welcome aspect of *Persia*'s gothification: instead of the innocent, clean-spoken and charming fighter *The Sands Of Time* gave us, we're now left with a one-dimensional videogame character – a gruff-voiced action hero who spends his fights spouting aggressive soundbites, a fact cemented in your mind by the swearing and lingering arse-tracking of the game's first few cut-scenes.

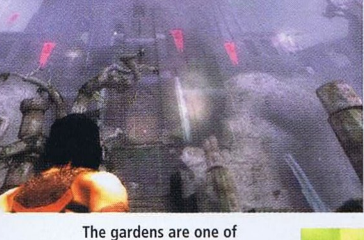
But whether or not the game's leaning towards a more generic dystopia is any less beautiful in the eye of the pad-holder, it's inarguably impressive, and still a few notches further up the property ladder than many in terms of current gameworlds. Also, there are numerous time-travelling detours into places far less dank and far more prettily lit than the architectural graveyard that initially seems to make up the game.

The Prince, perpetual snarl and all, has broadened his combat options somewhat, a necessary upgrade considering how much more prevalent battles have become. Instead of being limited to the cordoned stop-start rumbles of the original (conversely, the platforming sections now feel more staccato and less flowing by comparison), there's now a dizzying combo list that spills on for several pages in the pause menu. Moreover, the Prince can dual-wield weapons, including any of those dropped by his defeated foes, and can perform a variety of new gymnastic offensives – such as swinging around a pole with his legs or blades flailing, or slashing out during a wall run.

*The Warrior Within* carries upgrades, sure, but the change in tone here is probably as vital to your enjoyment as anything else. Whether the game can offer up anything as captivating as *The Sands Of Time*'s Observatory, or as energising a rush of agility and confident combat as that of the original, is for the review to decide.

Assuming, of course, that not even the Prince can outrun or dodge such a fated judgement.



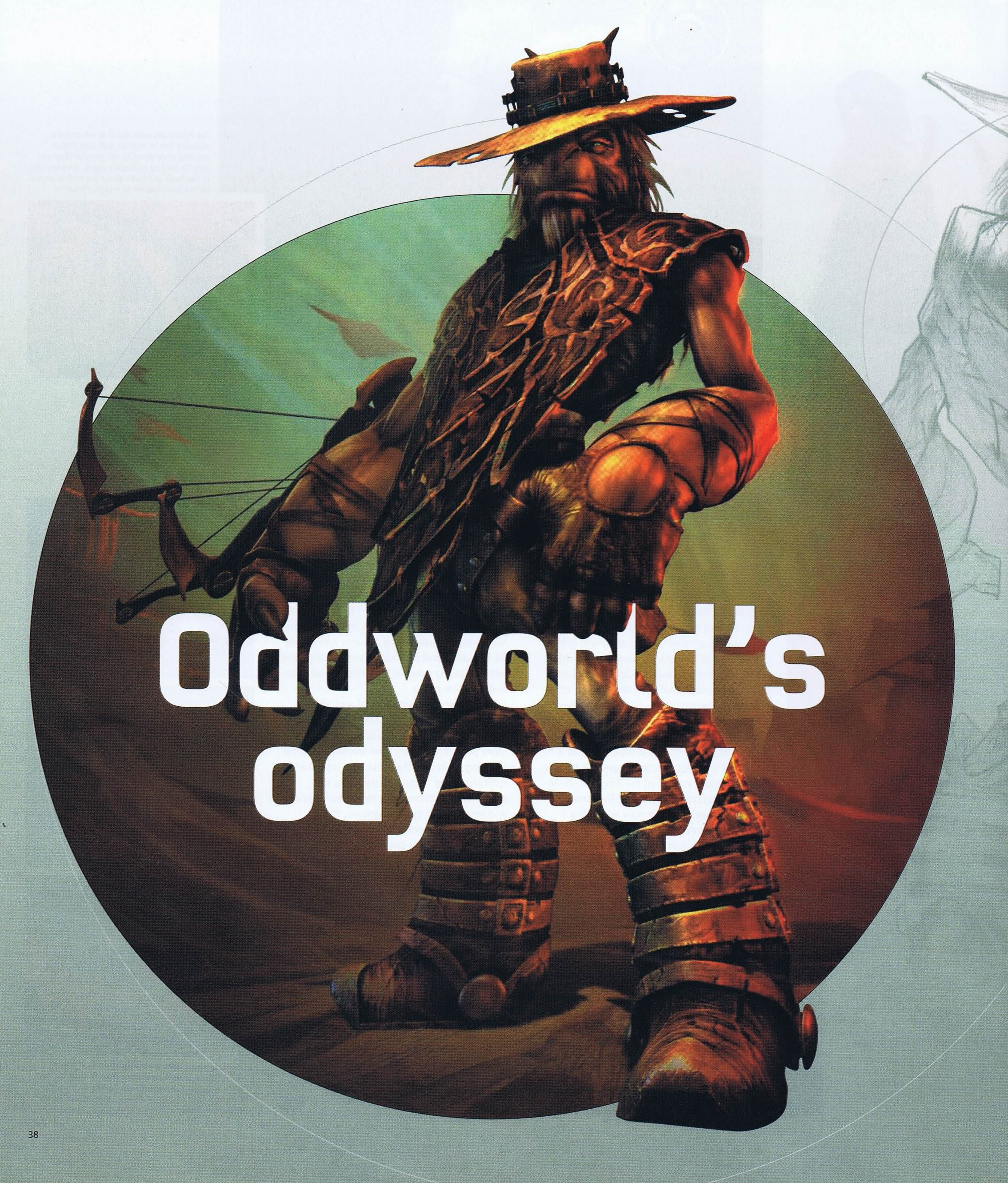
The gardens are one of a handful of panoramic throwbacks to the setting of the original game, including a magnificent statue/fountain centrepiece. Certain areas will have to be revisited in the past in order to progress



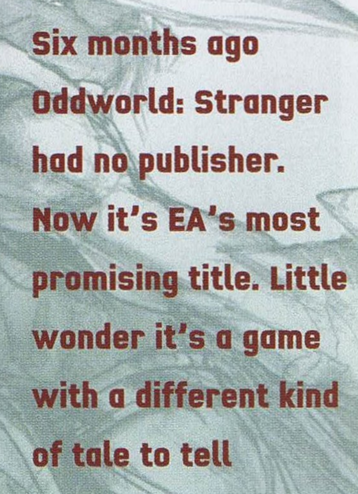




The opening boss fight is nothing more than a dull back-and-forth scene-setter, hampered as much by the camera as by your opponent's one-note attack pattern. The game's later bosses, by their very construction, do promise something a little more engaging, however



# Oddworld's odyssey



**Six months ago Oddworld: Stranger had no publisher. Now it's EA's most promising title. Little wonder it's a game with a different kind of tale to tell**

**Lorne Lanning**, co-founder of Oddworld Inhabitants, is leaning forward, a small heap of crisps forgotten in his palm. What he says is this: "Bad companies are the most fucking dangerous thing in the world today. Look at the United States – human interest is completely secondary to corporate interest. Everything post 9/11, post the Bush administration, all everything's about is screw the environmental issues, screw the public health issues, let's allow MORE mercury in the water. Why? Is it good for the people? No. It's WORSE for the people. Who's it better for? It's better for their friends who are running those corporations. And that is the biggest threat, in my opinion, facing the world today. It's not China, it's not North Korea – they might be serious threats – but the real danger is the big smiley face logo that pretends to be your friend and it's SCREWING the entire population." He sits back and smiles: "So, yeah, that's a pet peeve. I have a lot of angst."

Not much is known about Oddworld Inhabitants' new game, and there are two reasons for that. The first is that the company has made a sound decision to protect its story and its secrets from the hungry eyes of journalists. The second is that when you get hold of Lanning, asking him 'how-many-levels' and 'is-there-a-chaingun' questions seems like a waste of a potentially extraordinary conversation. As the co-founder of the company and the original visionary behind the odd world of Oddworld, Lanning has steered the company from oddysee to oddysee, from Abe's guffs to Munch's gurgles. Ten years on, few companies have survived so well on such a focused and peculiar vision. With *Stranger*, Lanning has a chance to take his mixed message of ugly beauty and comical politics to a new and ferociously sceptical audience: Xbox FPS fans.

**With Stranger, Lanning has a chance to take his mixed message of ugly beauty and comical politics to a new and ferociously sceptical audience: Xbox FPS fans**

**In the absence** of reams of press-release factoids, speculation has thrown up a few scraps of concrete information. *Stranger*, the fourth game from Oddworld Inhabitants, isn't strictly part of the Oddworld 'quintology'. Instead it's a side-story, taking place on the other side of planet Oddworld, miles from the factories of the Glukkons and the Vykkers. Its hero – Stranger – is a man of mystery, the mystery being that he's definitely not quite a man. His hybrid appearance may be part of his mysterious past, since there were indications very early in the game's development that Stranger's appearance could be a disguise for (or even a mutation into) something much more alien. A bounty hunter by profession, he plies his trade in a dusty western town, bringing various species of lowlife to justice with his double-barrelled crossbow. This shoots not inert bolts, but live animals – rapid-fire wasps and knockout skunk bombs, sticky spider traps and bat-propelled rockets – which must be hunted and herded when running low on ammo. Improvising combinations of double-barrelled destruction is at the core of the game's appeal.

It's this 'live ammo' which has caused much of the buzz surrounding the game, but it seems a little gimmicky compared to the game's real innovations. *Stranger* slips seamlessly between the perspectives, limiting you to slower speeds and ranged attacks in firstperson, allowing you breakneck acceleration and melee attacks in third. The range of views also allows exploration, platforming, puzzling and stealth to be closely integrated into the game without damaging the pure satisfaction of the gunplay. So why focus on the critters? "Is






Despite their feathers, the Clackers are the most instantly 'Oddworld' aspect of the new game. Attack them and they'll flee into their houses, squawking and criticising your lack of manners



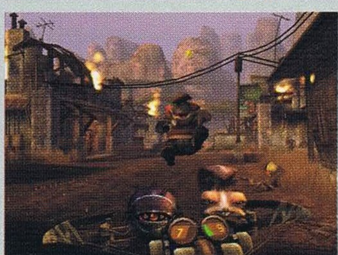
live ammo really the main point?" echoes Lanning. "I think if you asked people who really know the game, they'd say: 'Only for marketing.' People have to have something to grasp on to, so when EA were looking at the game and saying: 'So, what is our 'X'? What is the thing we're going to build our marketing campaign around?', they – and rightfully so – identified live ammo as being the thing that people could grasp. And we said: 'Oh, but we've got this, this, this, this, this and this' and they said: 'And now they're confused'. So I think that if live ammo is interesting enough to draw people in in the first place, then that's what it needs to achieve. Because there's so much more there than you can cover in a soundbite."

It was this awareness of the need to capture the public's imagination in seconds which has shaped much of *Stranger*. "In the world of the modern media, if people don't understand your game in two seconds then you can't get through to them," Lanning claims. "So you can have the greatest game in the world,

**Instantly recognisable and continually surprising, it's a luxurious and solid setting – everything Microsoft's Xbox was supposed to deliver**




The game's trademark live ammunition is animated, active and mouthy. Squirming around in your crossbow barrel, they react with shrill panic or aggressive enthusiasm to the prospect of being fired. Lanning assures us that they've been calibrated to ensure that this doesn't become grating as the game moves on and the novelty wears off



but if people have to have their hands on it for 20 minutes before they 'get' it, you're in deep trouble. So we wanted to have something that was a little more familiar, which is part of why we chose the western theme – because people get that: it's bounty hunting, it's outlaws, it's gunfights. And we liked the whole concept of Sergio Leone shootouts – that's something we really wanted to get into."

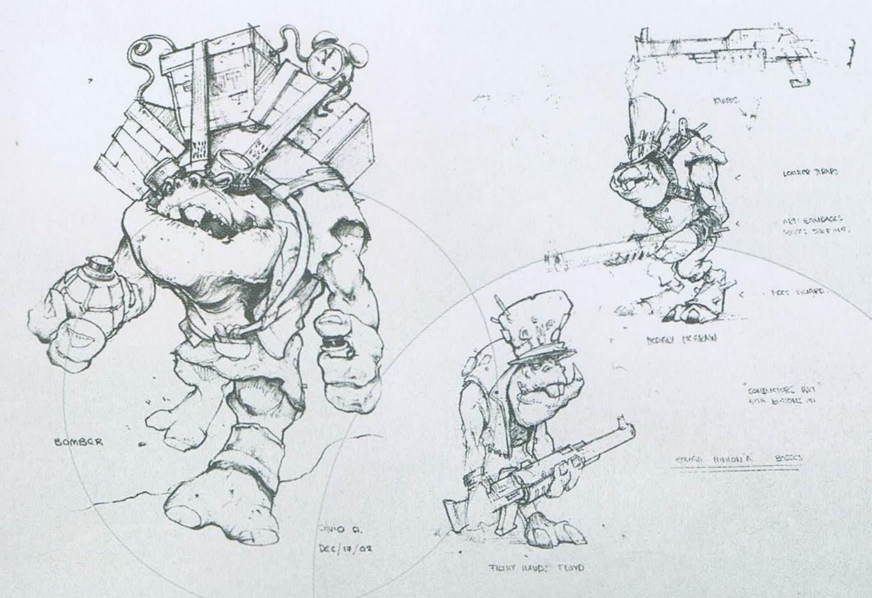
The result of Oddworld meeting the spaghetti western is a Frankenstein setting which doesn't have any business working as well as it does – caricatured chickens pretending to be men in the same way that Italian extras pretended to be American and the Spanish desert pretended to be Mexico. Instantly recognisable and continually surprising, it's a luxurious and solid setting – everything Microsoft's Xbox was supposed to deliver. Once Stranger's bounties take him beyond the local dust-bowls, the terrain will give way to pine forests, granite cliffs and snow-capped mountains.

**So, if commercial** appeal lay behind the game's setting, what lay behind the decision to mix thirdperson exploration with firstperson gunplay? Earlier Oddworld games had entirely refreshed the platforming genre – integrating spatial puzzles into a mechanic which had traditionally tested only dexterity. Is *Stranger* a similar attempt to rejuvenate the thirdperson adventure? "The answer to that is yes, except it was the FPS we were looking at and asking how that could evolve, how we could get more thirdperson action play into it." For Lanning, game design urgently needs to move beyond a point where perspective matters: "You don't say: 'Oh, I'm going to go and see a handheld movie, or I'm going to go and see a longshot movie.' You just go to see a movie. That's a medium which has matured, but at one point it was really just a peep show, and you would watch and a train would go by. That was it. Games are still at that stage."

Oddworld Inhabitants also thought that the firstperson perspective was a potential barrier for gamers. "A huge aspect for us is orientation, and an awful lot of people don't have a good response to a firstperson perspective – they get headaches – and I'm one of them. I'll get a headache after playing for two hours," confesses Lanning. "So we want to break from that, to have a smooth choreography

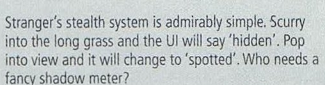



TITLE: ODDWORLD: STRANGER
FORMAT: XBOX
PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: ODDWORLD INHABITANTS
ORIGIN: US
RELEASE: Q1 2005




between perspectives so you're not always in that mode. *Halo* was an AWESOME game, but I could still only play it for two hours at a stretch, because I'd get disoriented, especially when it got into smaller rooms – you know when you're going through the tunnels? So we're trying to remedy those things. We're thinking how we get more people interested in games, and shooters, for example, don't interest a large number of females. But I do think they'll be interested in this, and early focus testing says that's true. And that's because it's not what experience has taught them shooters are all about – it's not all in firstperson and it's not all about killing. It offers a lot more, and it's not like women didn't like Sergio Leone movies, they LOVED Sergio Leone movies. You can't just ask: 'Oh, how do we make games for girls?' – that's insulting, right? You end up with Barbie games. Come ON. Girls have a brain, more of a brain in fact, and that's why they're not interested in most games."

Indeed, people with brains (regardless of their reproductive identity) are exactly the people Oddworld Inhabitants was conceived to attract: "Sure, you can make entertainment that doesn't have some kind of nutritional value but we aren't in the junk-food business. WE aren't – other people can be and that's fine, and I'll eat some of it and like it. Look at Sherry [McKenna, Oddworld Inhabitants' other co-founder] – she would not be interested in running this company at ALL if it wasn't for the characters and the stories, because she couldn't care less about the gameplay. She just says: 'Make sure it's good. Is it good? Are you promising me it's good?' because she just has no interest in playing. And if those stories and characters weren't there and if she didn't care about them then she'd just go off and do something else. She definitely doesn't need to


Stranger's stealth system is admirably simple. Scurry into the long grass and the UI will say 'hidden'. Pop into view and it will change to 'spotted'. Who needs a fancy shadow meter?

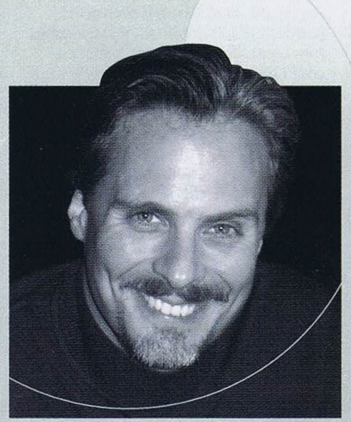



## Oddworld just got rarer

***Stranger***, **originally known as *Steef's Oddysee*, has had a rocky path towards release.**

Earlier this year, Microsoft pulled out from publishing the game. Lanning explains: "It's the kind of game where you have to see the vision and buy into it before you can support it – I don't think Microsoft believed we could pull it off." The irony is that this hesitancy was already evident in the game's first public airing – a 2003 Discovery Channel special about the Xbox which featured Ed Fries lamenting that Lanning never knew when to stop adding new ideas. The move to EA Partners was one which the company was very positive about, not least because it brought with it access to the PS2 demographic, a crucial component in Oddworld's biggest market – Europe. Speaking earlier this year, **Sherry McKenna** (Oddworld Inhabitants' CEO) described EA's confidence: "We didn't think it could be done. But EA absolutely said: 'No, this game can be converted,' and that's why we went with them." Now, the suspicions of everyone who's seen this resource-hungry game running have been confirmed: EA has cancelled the PS2 version. It's not clear exactly what lay behind that decision, but there's no question that the conversion was lagging far behind the Xbox version and would have had to be released months later.

The early enemies you meet seem dumb – not because their AI is lacking, but because that's their character. In fact, the AI was one of the earliest parts of the game to be developed, since your live ammunition can only act alive if it has an AI telling it when to scarper



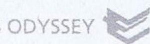
Although keen to stress the team effort, the game is very personal for Lanning, who provides the truly extraordinary voices of the characters

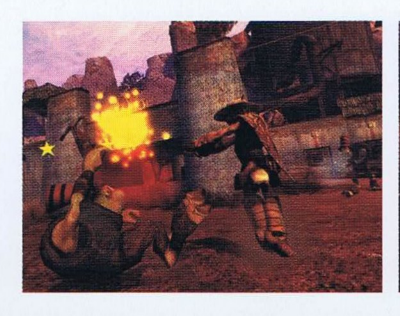
be running a games company."

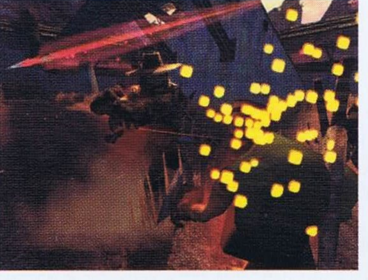
There's no detailed information yet on where *Stranger*'s story will take players. A point will come when the individual bounties Stranger accepts give way to reveal a main, central goal. In keeping with Lanning's passionate feelings about corporate greed and public health, Stranger's ultimate nemesis is a water baron, ruthless in his control over the flow of water to those living downstream. Lanning relishes the chance to be able to integrate his social concerns into the games he makes: "There are not many other media that let you make characters you care about and stories that mean something to you, so you can feel like you're doing something a little bit virtuous, like you're not just making Twinkies."

**Creating characters and** telling stories are not things games have traditionally excelled at, however, although Oddworld's games have always stood out. How does Lanning's approach differ from other game makers'? "With a lot of games, I feel like they have stories pasted on top of them, because the gameplay itself has nothing to do with the story. So what we try and do at the concept stage is design a story so that it's part of the character. With Stranger, when you find out more about him, it makes a lot more sense about why he uses live ammo, about why he doesn't like guns. It all ties in to the weapons that he uses and the speed he runs in the game. The mechanics of what he does in the world are totally related to his character and the story. And that's a lot more challenging than saying: 'OK, here's a guy with a gun, and you've seen 50,000 guys with guns, but this one's different because he got fucked over by his wife and now he wants revenge on the mob.' And you go: 'Well, maybe that's an interesting story and maybe it isn't, but it's still just a guy with a gun who does the same shit he does in every other game.'"

While he doesn't make it sound easy, Lanning at least makes designing 'nutritious' games sound feasible. Yet the number of games released each year with such lofty ambitions can usually be counted on the thumb of one hand. What needs to be done to encourage more people to make more nourishing games? "One of the first things we've got to do is stop doing shows like E3 and Game Stars Live. Because they're so loud, the only thing that gets noticed is the fastest cut, the most explosive demo. Things like E3 – look, we need E3, I know – but these events are starting to shape the product. It's like going to Cannes or







Melee-based, the thirdperson combat is no less fulfilling. Your top speed of 55mph allows you to 'clothesline' some slow-moving prey. Useful, since live bounty is worth much more than dead



Sundance and going into one huge room with a hundred screens and every screen is playing a movie and everybody is turning it up trying to be louder than the other guy. And if someone's showing a beautiful love story you go: 'Well, that sucks, because the cool one over here has MTV-style editing and cool explosions with people's heads getting blown off.'"

The movie analogy doesn't end with Cannes. For Lanning, film represents a benchmark that games are yet to reach: "With a game you sit down, often alone, for hours at a time. And you're focusing on it for more time than you spend with a film and yet it has less depth to it that your average film. That's less than an average film, not less than a good film. Games aren't even close to the depth a POOR film has yet. In time we'll see that all the things that make a film great are all the things that make a game great. If I look back on the history of this company, back to the SNES and the Genesis, games and films might as well have been the sun and the moon they were so completely different. And even a game of a film, well, maybe you were the Terminator and you shot at robots, but that was the only thing the film and the game had in common.

"But today, it's much closer – graphically it's closer, you see the characters, you have voice delivery, you have soundtracks. Take *The Sims*, right? And look at that, at what they've added for the new one. It's love stories, it's dating. It's all the things that have come from traditional entertainment in the last hundred years."

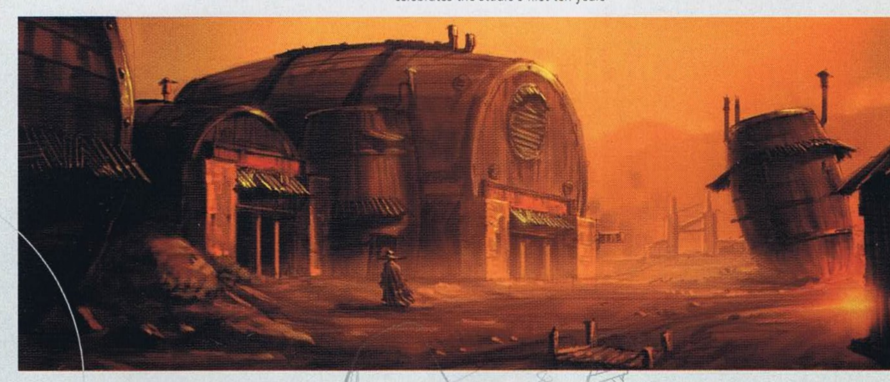
But, we point out, those aren't things that came from films. Those are things that came from life. Lanning chuckles. "Well," he declares, "we're ALL emulating life." Oddworld, with its parps and its burps, its social inequalities and political satires, its characters as clumsy as they are kind and as cruel as they are witless, has always done a better job of emulating life than most. *Stranger* still has to prove how well it can bear the weight of its ambitious story and the risk of its social sermons, but there's no doubt that its basic structure – the world, the weapons, the controls – are robust enough to handle almost anything Lanning piles on them.

And that might be quite a lot. He leans forward again, remembering something he read in that morning's paper: "Those guys who've stolen money from pension plans, they should be going to prison for life. They should get a longer term than a violent criminal, because how many people are they screwing over? Even the very worst serial killer, how many people did they take out? How many people's retirements did they ruin? Thousands of people, they just DECIMATED their whole financial existence. And for what? For a nice house in Aspen or somewhere. Those guys are PIGS..."

So, yeah. He has a lot of angst. And for that *Stranger* – and videogames in general – should perhaps be grateful.

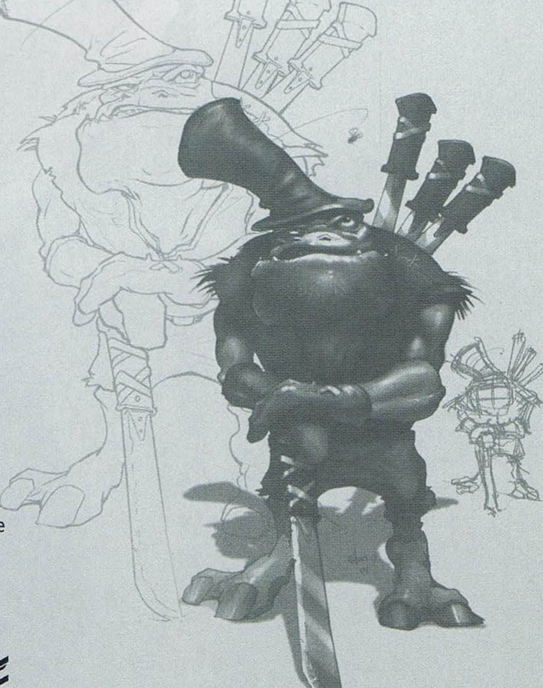
**Oddworld, with its parps and its burps, its social inequalities and political satires, has always done a better job of emulating life than most**

Although best known for its characters, Oddworld's landscapes have always been distinctive. A lavish artbook, available through the company's website, celebrates the studio's first ten years





Each type of ammunition has its own range and its own reticule. Swapping between them brings up a pause screen which lets you draw breath as you pick a nasty new combination




NINTENDO DS™

# Dual fuel

Twin displays, wireless multiplayer, mic input, touchscreen control and the small matter of new Nintendo software are driving a unique console. We visited Nintendo of America to witness a new era for handheld gaming



In January 2004, Nintendo made an announcement that bamboozled the world. The Nintendo DS – a handheld that wasn't the new GBA – was coming, promising a revolution in the way we play games. Its twin screens would offer a mysterious 'new perspective' on gaming. As new details trickled out, no one was any more convinced: it seemed like a chimera, a mythical beast made up of a peculiar oddment of parts. On November 21 it launches in the US, and what a difference a year makes. In this industry we're used to waiting twice that long for a game, let alone a new kind of hardware. Nintendo, not usually noted for its speed, has gone from press release to shop shelf in the space between two Christmases. It's a remarkable achievement – befitting a remarkable machine.

Nintendo of America's Gamers' Summit, which ran over the same two days as the Tokyo equivalent, was the first access Nintendo had granted to the finished hardware and a wide range of first- and thirdparty games. Its new machine acquitted itself faultlessly. It had everything Nintendo promised: twin screens, touch control, microphone input and wireless networking, all delivered in a unit which is robust if not beautiful, with a battery which should last ten hours and a retail price of US$150 ($197). There are at least 140 games in development, of

## Ridge Racer DS

Effectively a port of the N64 game, *Ridge Racer* has taken a bold step in embracing the DS. The lower screen is given over to a steering wheel, which you can turn with the stylus as you try to wrench your car around the track. Wrench is the right word as, at this stage, *Ridge Racer* is the only actually unworkable implementation of the touchscreen. Truly useless, you'll abandon it for conventional D-pad control within seconds. It's worth the transition, however, since the game itself is solid enough. Even those with unenthusiastic memories of the original might find themselves wooed back by something which offers a reassuringly old-fashioned thrill among all the DS's innovations.



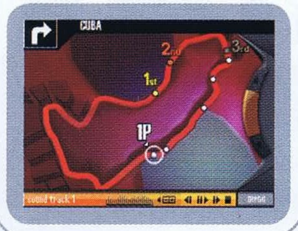




## Asphalt Urban GT

Another solid racer, although with less definite handling feedback than *Ridge Racer*. Of the games shown so far, this was one of the worst cases of map-'n'-menu use of the second screen, and the multiplayer set-up was buggy.






## Nintendogs/ Puppy Times

Nintendo's in-house attempt to update the pet sim. Each dog you raise will respond to voice commands over the microphone, and can be stroked and tickled with a twitch of the stylus.



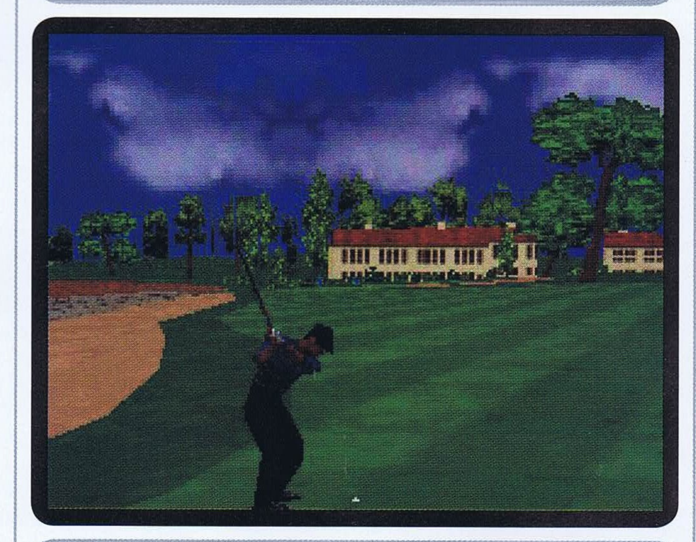




## Tiger Woods PGA Tour Golf

One of the first games to take full advantage of the mouse's ability to echo a real-world movement, it's unsurprising to see golf debut on the DS. Nor is it surprising to see that it's the *Tiger Woods* franchise supplying it, since it was the first console golf game to translate that experience on to an analogue stick. Golf is also an uncannily good match for the DS's 3D/2D splitscreen set-up. A full 3D visualisation of the course – pushing the DS probably as far as anything else to date – fills the top screen, while the bottom is free for 2D course overviews, menu screens and an analogue control panel. Each hole starts with a flyby, synchronised between both screens, and selecting a point on the map screen with your stylus zooms the 3D view to that point on the course.

Once you've selected your shot, the stroke is played by sweeping the stylus in a backwards 'U' – longer for more power, carefully curled to add (or avoid) fade and draw. Putting works well, with a precise grid display and the caddy tips familiar from the home console version of the game. A power boost can be added to shots by scribbling furiously on the touchpad before starting the stroke – a rather contrived translation of the joypad button-bashing system. This, a few aspects of the camera system, and the presentation of the swing meter – inexplicably divided into 12ths – need tidying, but *Tiger Woods* looks very promising.





which dozens will be available by Christmas. Rather than the spectre of lacklustre GBA ports, many take full advantage of the DS's odd range of capabilities, and those that do deliver on Nintendo's initially vague promise of a revolution. Nothing ever felt quite like this – there were no crashes, no flat batteries and only a handful of prerelease bugs. The chimera has been replaced by a true thoroughbred.

It's still an ugly thoroughbred – a squat stack of lines and planes built out of nasty plastic. Functionally, however, those looks are inspired. The nasty plastic keeps the cost down, making the US$150 bundle – complete with PictoChat and a generous *Metroid Prime Hunters* demo – massively appealing. Nintendo's new hero **Reggie Fils-Aime** (NoA's executive vice president of sales and marketing) calls it "a massmarket price," and he's right. Rather than endure a year of gradual price slicing, the DS is starting where the GBA ended up. And the squat clamshell encloses a device that is easily tough enough to endure a lifetime of school bags and bedroom floors. Dropping a DS isn't going to stop your heart.

Its size – definitely too big

## Wario Ware Inc.

No one was ever going to need much convincing about how happy a marriage this was going to be. *Wario Ware*, in many respects, was the software forerunner for the new Nintendo philosophy of which the DS's design is the hardware expression: accessible, instinctive gaming which fits into the cracks of a player's life. It's the game no one has a reason not to play.

It works as perfectly on the DS as you assumed. No one needs instructions to know they want to whirl all the paper off a loo roll in one ecstatic spool. No one needs telling that the duck belongs in a cage. No one can help wincing when they yank out that unsightly hair by the root. No one needs telling to keep that plate spinning or get those vegetables chopped. *Wario Ware*'s knowing sense of humour is also intact, occasionally showing you a picture of a GBA and asking you to touch its buttons with your stylus to control the game. It guarantees that your face will oscillate between puzzlement and delight as rapidly as it did in the original.

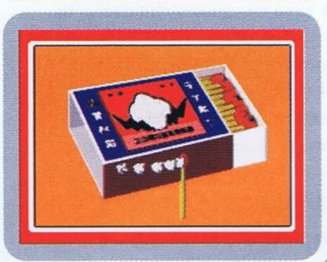
Despite the adoration *Wario Ware* has generated, it's not yet a title that has been particularly profitable for Nintendo. As close as it is to being the DS's killer app, the next few months ought to turn that situation on its head. It also makes designing the DS marketing campaign that little bit simpler. *Wario Ware* pods on every street corner should easily do the trick.





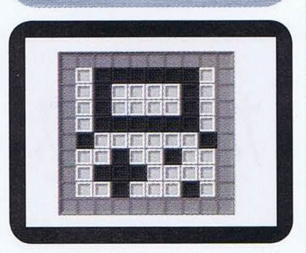


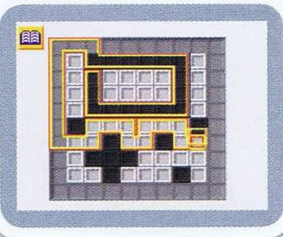




## One Line Puzzle

Nintendo's in-house puzzle game will be available for the Japanese launch of the DS. To clear the stage, you need match the colours by drawing a single continuous line over the panels, which will then flip from black to white.





for a pocket – is explained by the wealth of features it contains. The tiny stylus (Nintendo can presumably guarantee profitability simply by the number of replacements it will be able to sell) works with perfect precision on the touchscreen – although your thumbs will often do just as well. The machine's wrist strap also doubles as a mini stylus, strapping over a thumb to give you greater accuracy. Once your brain makes the tiny adjustment to being able to touch what it can see, anything else seems like a step back. Expect to endure an embarrassing touchscreen hangover as you poke and prod uselessly at mobile phone screens, PC monitors and TV sets.

> Expect to endure an embarrassing touchscreen hangover as you poke and prod uselessly at mobile phone screens, PC monitors and TV sets







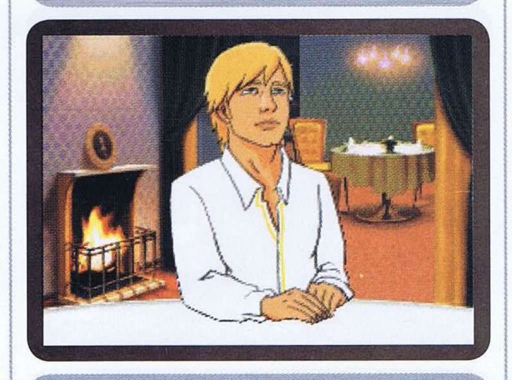
Nintendo has stuck with the square shape and cardboard format for US DS game packaging. US games will retail for US$30 ($39), whereas releases in Japan will fall across a wider range

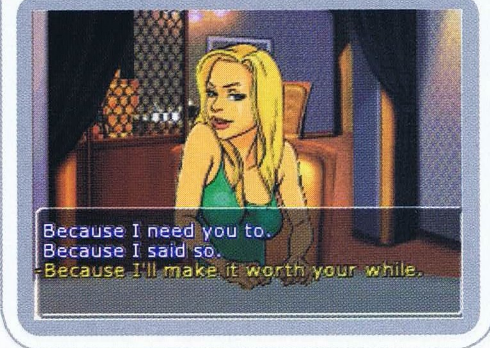
The quality of the display on both screens is good – 3D moving with smooth detail and 2D glowing with vibrant colours. GBA games (the console is fully backwards compatible) load into a front slot, and look extremely impressive. You can switch off the backlight via a menu option, but you're unlikely to want to. Audio, from stereo speakers or headphones, is clear and rich. Buttons are of the usual handheld standard, although movement on the D-pad may not be quite as distinct as on the SP.

**The most straightforward** flaw of the DS is its ergonomics. It's hard to see how Nintendo could have avoided this – the machine is likely to be held and used in a variety of unpredictable ways. However, the fact remains that holding the machine while using the stylus and covering the buttons is likely to lead you to develop some peculiar hand positions. In keeping a rather traditional approach to the machine's layout, Nintendo may have underestimated how strongly 'true' DS games are likely to rely on the stylus. Many of these play best with the unit placed flat on a surface, but this

## Sprung (formally Crush)

The name change is as baffling as the game, it must be said. Ubisoft's dating sim ('I can't believe that guy cheated on me with that cow from HR' not being words you expect to hear from a Nintendo console) is an old-fashioned dialogue-tree game. Choose your answer, and watch as the limited conversational options become exhausted and you either triumph and get the girl, or have to endure a long dinner party with a man who wants you to measure his head with a bucket (yes, really). Always assuming you've found the bucket. It's hard to imagine this being supported on any other console, and the touchscreen interface is a pretty slender excuse for sneaking it on to the DS.





## Another

Despite the disappointment of *Sprung*, the DS is an obvious home for point 'n' click (point 'n' touch?) adventures. Nintendo's *Another* will require you to use both the stylus and the microphone to solve its puzzles.

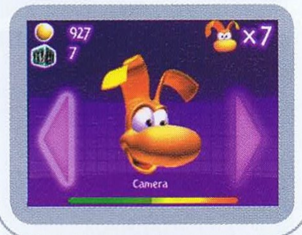





## Rayman DS

The only concrete details so far suggest that Ubisoft doesn't have any great ideas up its sleeve for that second screen ('interactive menu', no less), but the brand alone should ensure this popularity with the mass market.






can lead to a slight frustration in getting the perfect viewing angle for the bottom screen. No doubt some enterprising peripheral firm will launch a DS wedge holster, for perfect tabletop gaming.

The DS's most significant hardware revolution is invisible – its wireless capabilities. Cables and costs have plagued the last generation of Nintendo innovation. GC-to-GBA link-up was a modest enough expense, but the costly tangle of *Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicles* and the escalating price of four-cart, four-cable GBA connection put off consumers, and therefore developers, too. DS changes everything. Not only does wireless give you cost-free, cable-free multiplayer, it allows players to share their games in a way they never have before. Now, only one player needs to own the game for his friends to play, as his DS can broadcast the required software to other players once a session begins.

Previously, games like the eightplayer *Jam With The Band* would have proved commercial suicide: it's the kind of game only worth owning if all of your friends own it too, and none of your friends own it because it's only worth owning if all of their friends own it, etc, etc. Now, it's worth buying and worth playing because if you have it, then everyone has it. So long, that is, as they have a DS. Nintendo has turned the model on its head, using software to sell hardware.

Hundreds of question marks, good and bad, remain over the wireless systems. How well regulated will the game set-up systems be? Will many games be multiplayer with just one cart, or only some? How long will it take to upload the game to another player's DS? What is the maximum number of players the DS will be able to host? Just how expandable is the range (currently confirmed at 30 to 100 feet)? Will interesting gimmicks – such as the capability to download new Pokémon wirelessly to your DS as they appear onscreen during the new Pokémon movie – be one-offs, or become a wider part of DS ownership? The prospects are tantalising but, crucially, Nintendo is demonstrating from the off that the core function of wireless – the multiplayer – is fully operational. *MP Hunters: First Hunt* may prove the most important piece of bundled software in Nintendo's history.

Software is, of course, the key to the DS. This is not a machine that is going to sell on its looks alone. Nor, any more, on its brand. (Shorn of the untarnished Game Boy name, the Nintendo

> DS changes everything. Not only does wireless give you cost-free, cable-free multiplayer, it allows players to share their games in a way they never have before

## Mr Driller: Drill Spirits

Another match made in heaven. The DS's twin screens give Mr Driller the portrait orientation he's been crying out for for years, and the touchscreen interface makes his job easy and precise. Simply touch the block you want rid of, and use the top screen to keep an eye on the precarious towers shuddering down toward you. Advanced players may find the touchscreen a little unresponsive for lightning-fast manoeuvres, but the game includes full button support so there's nothing preventing a return to basics. A new mode (where you're chased by a giant drill) and some fresh characters do little to upset the simple equation of Mr Driller's appeal. Just don't forget to breathe.









DS games arrive on chunkier versions of SD-style cards. So the media, at least, is totally dinky

## Caduceus: Surgical Operation

One of the earliest DS announcements, this surgery game requires a steady stylus as you carve your way through your patients, and a steady voice as you coo reassuringly to calm them.

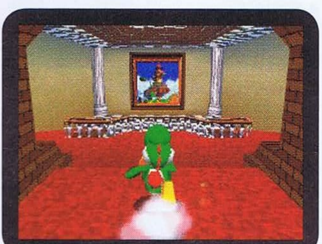





## Super Mario 64 DS

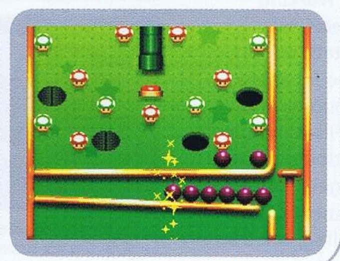
It is difficult to imagine a more hazard-laden idea than this: *Mario 64*, a game whose brilliance lay in how perfectly it had been designed around its controller, ported to a wildly different system. Many changes have been made to help it adapt to its new home – new characters (Yoshi, Wario and Luigi are all playable), new moves (spin jumps and Yoshi's strained hover) and new levels (the brief glimpses available so far don't indicate anything with the inventive wit of the originals) – but none are truly convincing. The third iteration of the control scheme (movement on the stylus, jump/attack/crouch on the D-pad) unquestionably works, but lacks the precision that made the original an exercise in joy. It remains to be seen how perseverance will change the experience of playing these familiar levels in a quite different manner.

The new minigames – of which there are over 30 – couldn't provide a more startling contrast. All touchscreen-based, some provide the same teasingly twitchy pleasures as *Wario Ware*, while others evolve into much more rounded puzzle games. All are pure DS, deploying the twin screens and the stylus to full and unexpected effect, and are easily good enough to justify a full game on their own. It's hard to imagine a title that could better demonstrate how crucial it will be for DS software to be designed specifically around the capabilities of its hardware.





## Pokémon Dash

Simply scrub with your stylus to send Pikachu scampering from one checkpoint to the other. The inclusion of hot-air balloons wasn't enough to save this – a Japanese launch game – from looking rudimentary and repetitive.






label carries as much negative baggage as fanboy kudos.) What will sell the DS are the games that make owning one fun, and on this front Nintendo has also achieved something remarkable.

The handheld market is crowding out – the N-Gage, Tapwave Zodiac and the Gizmondo all trying to stake their place while the prospect of the PSP floats above them like a hulking Death Star – and all are trying to differentiate themselves on hardware. The N-Gage is the phone one, the Zodiac is the PDA one, the Gizmondo is the GPS one, but not one (as yet) has a distinctive piece of software to call its own. Indeed, none of those companies have yet proved that they have any instinctive understanding of the kind of games people want to play on personal gaming devices. Among me-too console clones and ill-advised D-pad FPSs, all are yet to release the software which will define the point of owning their machine. It's in this arena that Nintendo's 15 years of experience is telling.

Why own a device with wireless? Play *Hunters* and find out. Why own a device with a touchscreen? Play *Yoshi's Touch And Go* and find out. Why own a device with a microphone input? Croon to your patients in *Caduceus* and find out. Why own a device with two separate screens? Play *Tiger Woods Golf* and find out. These games – varied and, strikingly, not all firstparty – all operate as convincing reasons to own a DS rather than any other machine. Nintendo knows more about fitting games into people's lives and into pockets (or schoolbags or handbags or manbags or whatever) than anyone else, and it's hard to shake the feeling of a master returning to teach the new kids a lesson.

## The Urbz DS

*The Urbz* is the result of EA eyeing up exactly the demographic that the DS is supposed to hit – teenagers and 'young adults', the very people who found the suburban simplicity of *The Sims* too twee and safe. Sadly, *The Urbz* seems as unlikely to appeal on the DS as on any other platform – a self-conscious, unfocused misunderstanding of the first game's core appeal, it's clogged with repetitive minigames and preaches an unsettling message of conformity (move to a new area, and you can only make friends by dressing like the locals). Adding body piercing and motorbikes to an unappealing gameworld seems unlikely to crack open the wallets of picky teenagers – for either EA or Nintendo.






### This isn't overstating

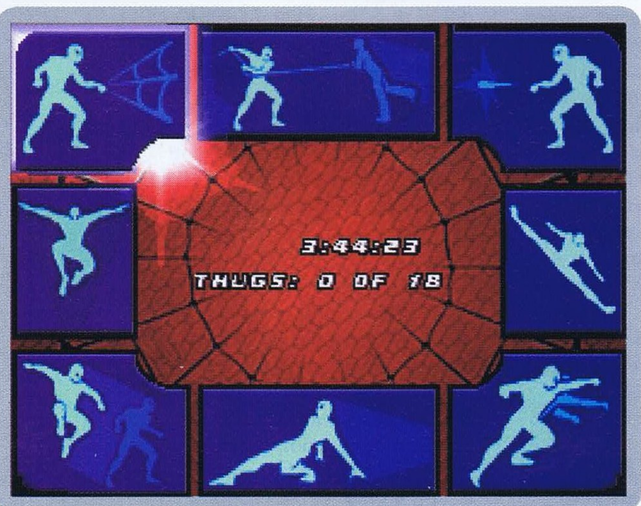
the situation: Nintendo still has plenty to prove about the software potential of the DS. Of the games it's been possible to preview, as many are misses as hits. The incredibly rapid development of the machine has left little time for new content creation. Teams with only a few

## Spider-Man 2

Rather weirdly singled out as "my personal favourite" by Fils-Aime, *Spider-Man 2* is something of an anomaly in the early DS line-up. Despite being surrounded by developers over-reaching themselves to take full advantage of the DS's capabilities, *Spider-Man 2* is fundamentally little different from a GBA game. The top screen shows the smooth and fluid 2.5D platforming action, the touchscreen acting only as a giant selection pad for Spidey's special moves. While this does allow rapid switches of tactic, it feels a rather transparently token DS gesture.

The lack of 'DS-ness', however, is no real criticism of the game. A soaring platformer with elements of side-scrolling brawler, *Spider-Man 2* is as free and intoxicating as all good Spider-Man games must be. Web-slinging and wall sticking make movement freeform and improvised, and the combat is promisingly flexible. Vicarious Visions' challenge is to produce level design robust enough to withstand the shortcuts that enterprising players are sure to find, and to vary mission requirements and combat encounters so the game's scale doesn't become a slog. The demo level available was complex and interesting, but lacked focus and a sense of progression. If this is fixed, Spider-Man could make a very happy home for himself on the DS – even if he hasn't packed a stylus, a mic or a second action screen.






## Ping Pals

*Ping Pals'* core function – a text-and-sketch-based wireless message system – mirrors exactly that of Pictochat, which comes free with the DS. For the extra $20 all you'll get is an extremely likeable customisable avatar.





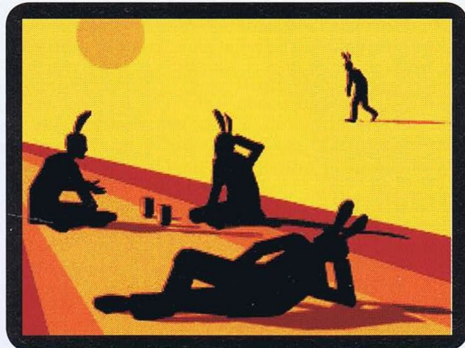


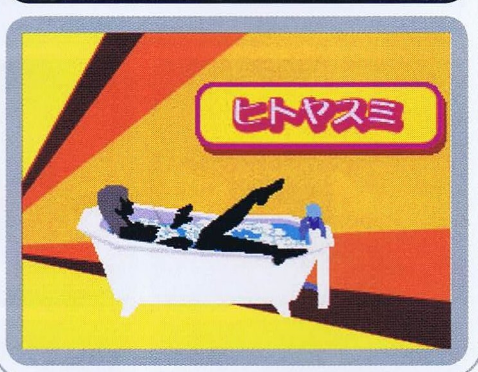
months to complete a project have had to focus all their efforts on mastering the new input possibilities of the machine, recycling existing GBA and N64 content to fill the gaps. Others have struggled to find – or to successfully implement – those new input possibilities in their game designs. Consequently, there's no clear answer yet on how dramatically the DS will reshape the nature of game design. Will things never be the same again, or will the DS settle down into a groove of creating intuitive puzzles and minigames, and cloning mouse-dependent old favourites?

It's a big question, but we're unlikely to have to wait long for an answer. Some launch DS games have been put together in a whisker under six months. That means second-generation DS games will be with us sometime in the autumn. And, unlike the limited success of GC and GBA link-up, this time Nintendo isn't working alone. The DS has received almost unprecedented support, particularly from the Japanese development community, and with good reason. Fils-Aime sums it up: "What we're doing allows ideas to trump budgets." At a time when development costs and times are spiralling, the DS is the first sign of a hardware

## Feel The Magic: XX/XY

Now mature enough to have its own title (and one with a little genetics gag at that), Sega's rubbing game has revealed a grown-up theme. You'll be using the stylus the win the affections of a rather haughty girl by picking scorpions off her, protecting her from rampaging bulls and gently cleaning dirt patches off her skin while she oohs and ahhs encouragingly. The final nail in this delightful and daringly stylish game's hopes of ever being played in public is when you have to huff into the microphone to blow out candles. It's not clear at this stage how many more of these winsome and unpredictable ideas it has up its sleeve, or whether the overall pace will prove frustratingly slow.

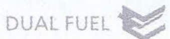








Despite the chunkiness of the overall design, the detail on the DS is crisp and functional. Four face buttons, plus start, select and shoulder buttons give more game options, and the tiny stylus slots away behind the hinge



## Yoshi's Touch And Go

*Yoshi's Touch And Go* is what happens when Nintendo designs a radical new piece of hardware and then crafts a videogame around it. The last time the company did that, we got *Mario 64*, and *Touch And Go* shares much of its magic.

Two levels were available to play. The first sees Baby Mario tumbling to earth, supported only by a handful of balloons. To protect him from enemies (and steer him towards coins) you must use the bottom screen to draw in platforms of clouds. These then scroll steadily up to the top screen, turning your hastily sketched idea into videogame reality. Enemies can be captured in the bubbles formed by a quick circle of your stylus. It's creative, demanding and delightful – and encourages frequent replays as you figure out the perfect route.

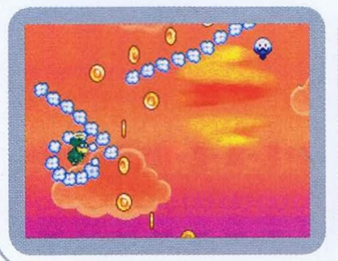
Once safely at ground level, Baby Mario switches to Yoshi power. He trundles along, and you assist him by drawing cloud bridges, aiming his eggs with a tap of the stylus and encouraging him to jump on enemy heads. Building a cloud ladder to reach a cache of high-altitude coins, or firing a well-aimed egg high into the top screen is irresistibly enchanting.

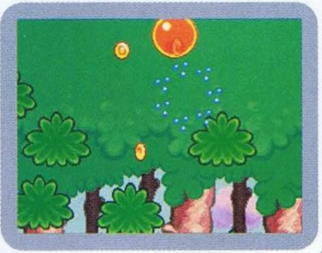
Even if the finished *Touch And Go* does nothing but offer subtle variations on those two levels, it's still hard to see how it could be anything less than the definitive DS launch title. From the innovation on show, however, it seems likely there'll be even more to savour.











## Future releases
A selection of confirmed titles

Animal Crossing DS
GoldenEye DS
Viewtiful Joe DS
Mario DS
FF: Crystal Chronicles
Bomberman
New Boktai game
Harvest Moon
New Team Ninja game
New Mana series game
New Dragon Quest game
New Sonic game
Puzzle Bobble
Mario Kart DS
Puyo Puyo Fever
Egg Monster Hero
Pokemon Diamond and Pearl
Final Fantasy III
Winning Eleven
Shin Sangokumuso
New 'Tales of' series game
Castlevania
LoZ: Four Swords DS
Vandal Hearts
Survival Kids
Shin Megami Tensei DS
Rakugaki Okuku (Pengel)
Frogger
Need For Speed Underground
Monster Farm
Survival Kids
Pac'n'Roll
Magical Vacation DS

## Advance Wars DS

Still some way off, *Advance Wars* will bring a satisfying change of pace to a DS line-up currently dominated with quick-fix thrills. Taking full advantage of the twin screens, the game will give the top screen over to air units, keeping ground troops to the touchscreen. It's not yet clear how the controls will work, but it seems likely to exploit the touchscreen and stylus as much as possible. The story seems as strong as ever, with hints of star wars-style (Reagan, not Palpatine) weapon systems and old feuds. For those who worry that the GameCube's *Advance Wars: Under Fire* is a step too far away from the game's core appeal, the DS version looks to be the perfect antidote.







## Pictochat

After a successful debut at E3, it was good to get a chance to see Pictochat in the 'wild', with no Nintendo police patrolling to eject anyone drawing genitalia or Sega characters. The results were as entertaining as you'd expect.







manufacturer committing to a future which isn't dependent on endless graphical inflation. Nintendo has taken a dramatic sideways step, and there's no question that it's a risky one. It's hard to see how the industry can survive – at least without becoming depressingly monolithic and conservative – unless others follow this lead. However, as the GameCube's life has shown, that developer support (or, perhaps more pertinently, publisher support) can only be guaranteed as long as the hardware has the market penetration to sustain it. It's one thing for Nintendo to demonstrate that it has delivered on its New Year promise of innovation and value; it's another to convince consumers to respond. Nintendo is sure they will: it has a million units waiting to ship in the US before Christmas and is confidentially predicting shortages. But there's no question that the DS is a tough sell. Its looks will count against it, having neither the sleek simplicity of the SP nor the aspirational futurism of the PSP. It's also a horror to explain to people – at least, it is in words. Sitting someone down in front of *Wario Ware* is the easy bit. Communicating twin-screen, touch-sensitive, microphone-input, wireless-ready, backwards-compatible gaming to someone

> There's no question that the DS is a tough sell. Its looks will count against it, having neither the sleek simplicity of the SP nor the futurism of the PSP

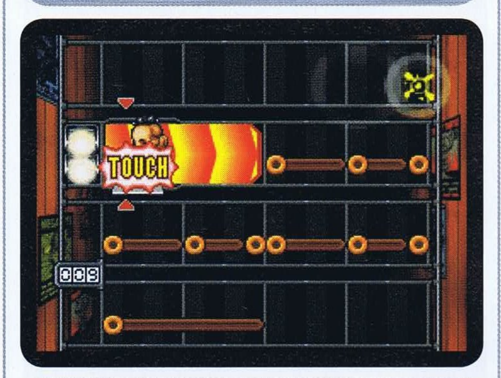


Dev DS ROMsets look a little like the units used back in the SNES's heyday

## Jam With The Band/Band Bros

This very simply presented rhythm-action game supports up to eight players, all contributing a different instrument to the song. The 'touch' aspect is minimal, the game mostly requiring you to press a button in time with the scrolling display. This simple gameplay can then be edited, with a manuscript interface allowing you to write in new notes with the stylus. Voice samples can also be added, recorded via the DS's microphone.

Altogether, the game can keep track of 128 instruments per track, and building up harmonies with your friends is enormously satisfying. So long as you don't need eight cartridges – and you shouldn't – this should be a delight.

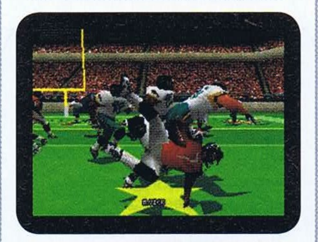


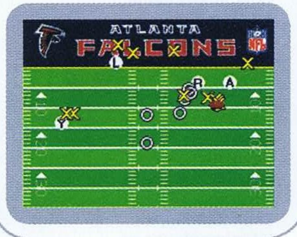




## Madden

A crucial part of the DS's US launch, *Madden* lends itself well to the DS. A 3D camera and a 2D overview communicate the action very clearly, and it's a bonus to be able to call genuinely secret plays during multiplayer.






## Meteos

This isn't *Rez 2*, despite being devised by Mizuguchi. Use the stylus to drag the blocks to make matching lines – these then turn into rockets and launch the blocks above them into space – dumping them on to your opponent's screen.





## Metroid Prime Hunters: First Hunt

*Hunters* raised more eyebrows than it dropped jaws at E3, the stylus firing mode felt by many to be ill-advised. That system is now history, and in its place is a very classic, very precise FPS. Move with the stylus, strafe with the D-pad, fire with the left shoulder button, tap to jump – it's a clever adaptation of over ten years of PC FPS evolution, and it works very well on the handheld.

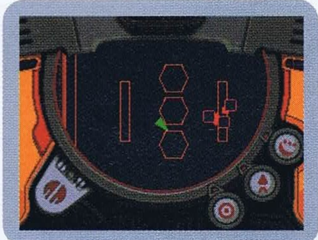
Graphically, *Hunters* is also impressive – manipulating a smooth, atmospheric 3D world without the slightest fuss. There's no point in criticising the functional appearance of the lower screen – this is purely a backdrop for your stylus to move on top of. Multiplayer set-up is easy and effective, and the levels included in this bundled demo offer (just about) enough variety to keep players satisfied until the full game debuts early next year.

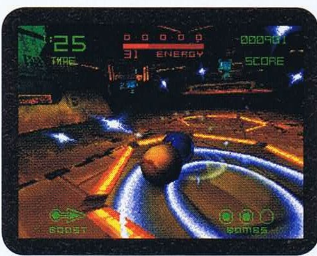
Three singleplayer missions are also included for those who aren't attracted to the deathmatch. Two are simple but satisfying duck shoots in levels crawling with metroids, the third is a rather unexpected racing game – a time-trial course for your morph ball form to follow – which shows off the stylus's precision very well. All three are enjoyable diversions, but the point of the *First Hunt* trial is to introduce DS owners to the potential of wireless multiplayer as soon as possible, and the game provides every incentive to badger your friends into buying one too.









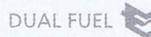







who's never heard of the device before will test Nintendo's ad men to their limits.

They have, however, some unbeatable advantages. The price, for a start, is hard to argue against. And the timing is ideal: ready for Thanksgiving in the US, for Christmas in Japan, and for whenever long-suffering Australians take advantage of its region-free nature and import (or early 2005 if you can wait that long for the official release). And it's this that is the DS's real advantage. It's here. It's ready. It works. At a time when interest in the handheld market is soaring, Nintendo has emerged as the company best able to take full and early advantage of it. What will happen when the PSP arrives, with its impressive roster, its extraordinary looks, its vast screen, its proprietary multimedia formats and its potentially disastrous battery, is hard to predict. It's still an irresistible prospect, commercially and critically, but at the moment that's all it is – a prospect. Nintendo promised second and delivered first. Sony has promised everything and is yet to deliver at all. When the PSP finally debuts, it may well face a bigger DS userbase than it expected.



# Kicking ass and taking notes: an interview with Reggie Fils-Aime

**Nintendo has been criticised in previous generations for having poorer thirdparty support than its competitors. The situation seems much stronger with the DS. How have you accomplished that?**
We've accomplished that via a number of key initiatives. First, frankly, before the exposure of the DS at E3, we spent quite a bit of time with our licensees, sharing with them our vision for the DS. In addition, we've held developer conferences and we've had members of the NoA licensing group visit key western publishers all with the focus of helping them understand why this is such a significant initiative not only for Nintendo but in our view for the industry.

**Is that a change from how Nintendo has managed things previously?**
That's a great question, but one that I really can't answer, having only been with the company about a year. But I do know that as I came on board, one of the things that I pushed the NoA organisation towards was that we absolutely had to improve our ongoing relationships with our thirdparty publishers – meaning the amount of time that senior executives like myself spend with our key partners, the amount of information we share, and frankly, finding a meeting of the minds as to why their support is so critical for us and the types of things we could do to help them be successful as well.

**You took the step of raising the question of the PSP's battery life in your address at the Gamers' Summit. Are you frustrated by the optimistic press response to the PSP?**
I think that Sony has done a masterful job of creating excitement without showing a lot of substance, and by that I mean that it is very unclear whether they will launch in Japan this year or not. It is very unclear what their pricing will be, it's very unclear as to what their titles will be, it's very unclear as to its battery life and durability. It's also very unclear on how they propose to deliver on their grand idea of multifunctionality in terms of movies and audio playback. They've been able to get many in the press excited simply on the basis of a visual prototype of their device. In contrast, at E3 we showed real product and real demos, and yet many members of the press were taking shots at DS, so certainly I'm frustrated about that. Now, having said all that, our focus is to make the launch of DS as provocative and successful as we can, and we know that that's totally under our control. So one of the things that we've challenged my team to do is, you know, we need to stop focusing on what Sony might or might not do, and we need to move forward with our own plans.

**What age range constitutes the core demographic for Nintendo DS? Are you actually interested in wooing older gamers and, if so, how do you intend to appeal to them?**
From an Americas perspective, we're going after a prototypical 20-year-old, a consumer who's a bit older, who's looking for a bit more complexity in their gameplay. I personally believe that it's a little bit more challenging to deal with two screens – it's a little bit more challenging to utilise a touchscreen – and so in my view the DS is a product which will up-age the Nintendo franchise. And as I look at the launch line-up here in the Americas, that is also very strategically designed to up-age the brand and go after this 20-year-old consumer.

**Is there a danger in stepping away from the perception of you as 'the fun company', 'the childlike company', 'the magical company', turning you into something that's more adult?**
You know, I don't believe that those two ideas fight each other. So, said another way, we will always be the magical company, we will always the company to create ideas like *Donkey Konga* or *Pikmin 2*, to put Mario in unique situations like *Mario Pinball Land* [reviewed on p99]. The difference in my view is whether we are able to get that more provocative teenager or young adult to feel that the brand speaks to them, or whether they feel that it's something for their little brother. That to me is our challenge, and I see Nintendo able to reach that older teenager in what is still a very magical, very fun way.

**What does the DS reveal about Nintendo's vision for the future of the home console?**
What we are saying, and I passionately believe this, is that the future of gaming is about the interface and the innovation in the interface that we provide for gamers. That's what going to get the future gamers excited versus simply focusing on technology for technology's sake. So when we look at DS and the various input devices – touchscreen, voice activation, wireless, two screens – that's certainly a model for how we're thinking about our entire business. Just like how we look at the innovation around *Donkey Konga* and the bongos as an input device, that's how we see the future of gaming.

"It was all about saying we ARE going to drive this business, we ARE going to be successful and we would love for you to come on board with us, but if not, y'know, then you'd better get the hell out of our way"

**You've been at Nintendo a year now. What was your perspective of the company before you joined, and how has that changed?**
You know, I have to say candidly I was a SNES consumer, I probably have every SNES game ever made – I play them with my children – I have an N64, I have competitor systems in my house – I'm unabashed to say that I've tried all the systems and I have good understanding of them all. I wouldn't go so far as to say I'm a gamer, but I certainly understand and enjoy playing games and have a passion for the industry.

**So, as a Nintendo consumer, did you come on board with some things you wanted to change from your own experience of the company?**
Absolutely. This demographic targeting issue is something that I walked in the door with very strong views about. The goal of creating new franchises and new genres and pushing the envelope in terms of innovation was something I walked in the door with. A passion to see Nintendo once again be at the top of this industry. Those were all things I walked in the door with.



**"My name is Reggie. I'm about taking names, I'm about kicking ass." That line is probably quoted more than any of your other announcements this year. What made you decide to take that approach?**
That presentation was a reflection of the vision that Nintendo has for how we move forward, as well as a reflection of my own competitive spirit and my own view for what's required to drive Nintendo into the future. I think, in all candour, part of the reason why that presentation sparked with the Nintendo fanbase so strongly is that the Nintendo fans have been waiting for a vision for how Nintendo can retake its rightful position at the top of this industry, for how the company could drive innovation and, frankly, how the company would be more aggressive and competitive in the marketplace, and I was fortunate enough to capture all of that in a handful of words.

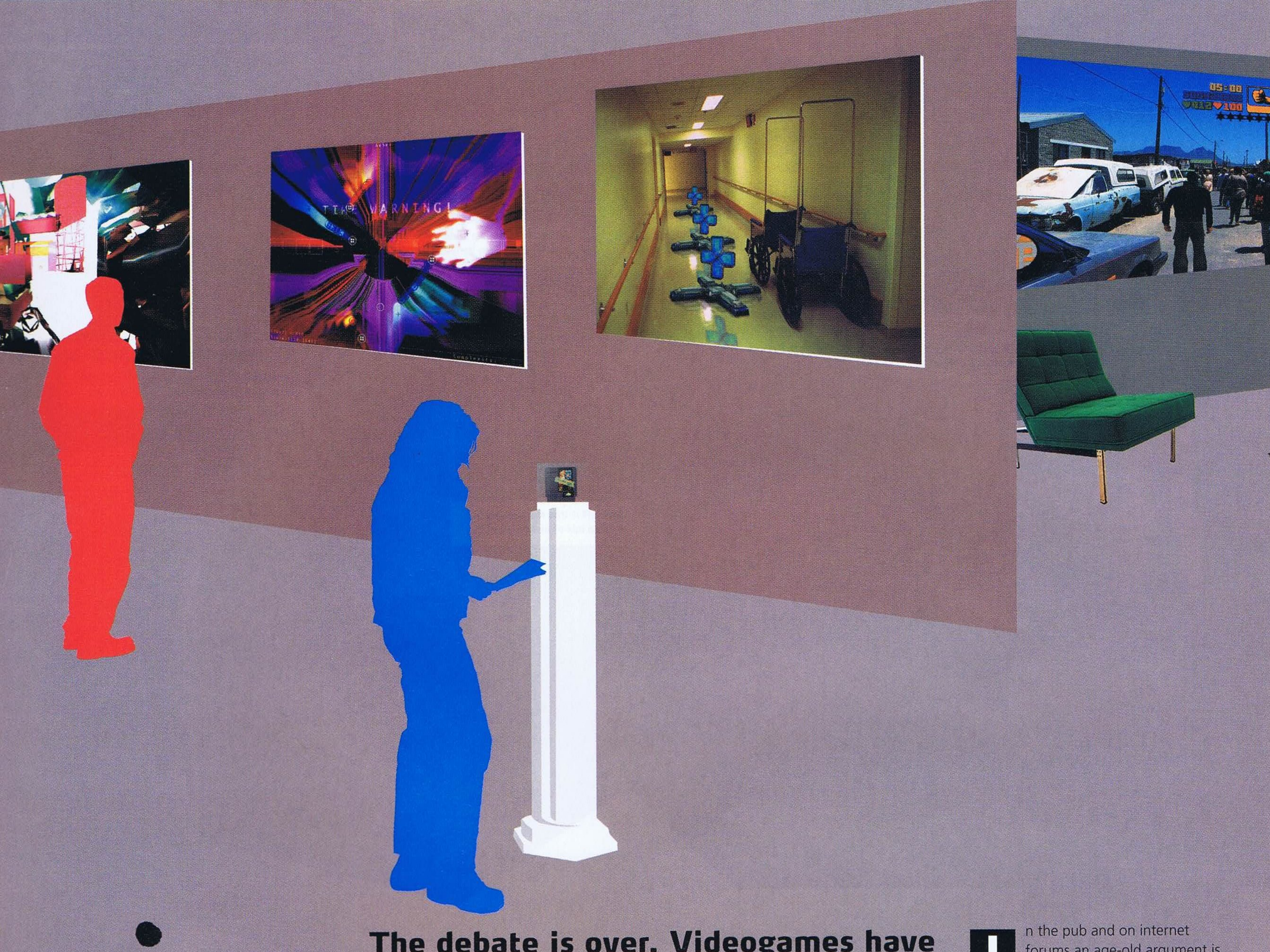
**Did have any particular names and asses in mind?**
Names to take and asses to kick? Well, yeah. [Hesitates] Well. Other than the other hardware manufacturers, it was really a statement to the industry, to the Nintendo fans and frankly to everyone who's associated with Nintendo, our employees, or licensees – it was all about saying we ARE going to drive this business, we ARE going to be successful and we would love for you to come on board with us, but if not, y'know, then you'd better get the hell out of our way.

**At the start of each new generation talk always turns to the 'console wars'. What is winning for Nintendo?**
Winning for us is, first, driving consumer satisfaction. Creating games and systems that excite our consumer base. Second, driving sales and driving our worldwide marketplace share is a key indication of winning for us. But, frankly, we have to do all that profitably. We know that at least one of our competitors is not all that beholden to delivering bottom-line profitability – they have the advantages of very deep pockets. We have to deliver profits, we are a gaming-focused company and that's why, in my view, the focus on innovation is so critical.

**The DS has gone from prototype to market in less than a year. How has it been possible to get things moving so quickly?**
In a large part it has been the development tools which we delivered to our licensees, and to the intense time that we spent with our licensees and thirdparty developers even before working systems were made available, to help them understand our vision. So, to use some American slang, we did a lot of spadework early on. That's what's made it possible to do what we've done.



# But is *it*

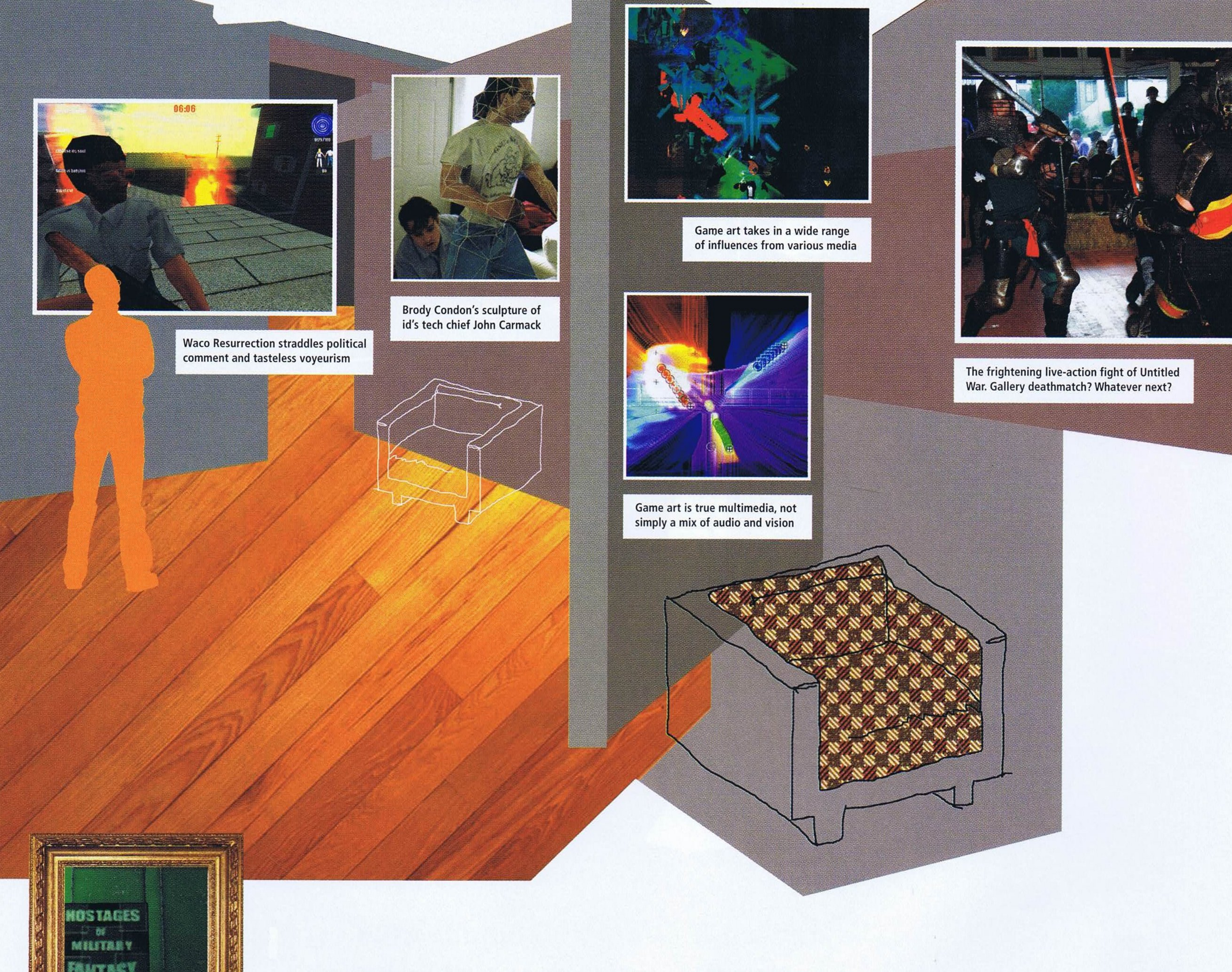



# is it art?

**The debate is over. Videogames have become art. But not necessarily in ways anyone could have foreseen**

In the pub and on internet forums an age-old argument is being played out: are games art? The question is as old as the games themselves and the discussion is bone dry, worthless and exhausted. Thankfully, there are a few people out there who are simply skipping the argument stage and are getting on with turning games into art, whether the pub-bound pontificators like it or not. But this isn't some cerebral exercise in talking up the aesthetics of *Tomb Raider*, rather it is a movement in which the raw materials of games, and the images associated with them, have become objects designed and made for galleries, exhibitions and the keen eyes of art patrons the world over.

Numerous game-inspired art exhibitions have appeared over the last year. From Los Angeles to New York to Rotterdam, the galleries are filled with the sounds of gurgling bleeps and the sight of unusual polygons. One of the most successful works was the Bang The



Waco Resurrection straddles political comment and tasteless voyeurism

Brody Condon's sculpture of id's tech chief John Carmack

Game art takes in a wide range of influences from various media

Game art is true multimedia, not simply a mix of audio and vision

The frightening live-action fight of Untitled War. Gallery deathmatch? Whatever next?

Anti-war decals have proliferated as impromptu level graffiti in Counter-Strike, but don't expect to see any of these works making it on to the walls of the Tate

Machine exhibition at the Yerba Buena Centre in Los Angeles. Typical of this new wave of game art shows, the exhibition included exhibits such as a lemon tree that used acid battery power to run a selection of Game Boys; a replica of the Arts Centre that could be explored virtually in *The Sims Online*; a booth in which gallery walkers could (bizarrely) sit down and play the military PR tool *America's Army*; and a five-foot sculpture of *Doom* programmer John Carmack, based on his avatar from *Quake 3 Arena*.

**The sculptor of** Carmack's peculiar effigy was the Amsterdam- and LA-based artist **Brody Condon**. Condon has had a prolific and pioneering relationship with game art in the last few years. We talked to him about his experience with gallery based installations. First up, what was the Carmack statue all about? "Put simply, Carmack's passion for engine coding has influenced our culture in profound ways," says Condon. "Beyond a simple kind of hero worship, it's the form that thing has taken that is more important. It seemed perfect that the portrait of him be appropriated from one of the his own games. It was really around the time of *Quake 3* that this important phenomenon of 3D likenesses of actual people started to show up. Strangely, the evolution of realistic game spaces and individuals is loosely following the evolution of portraiture and landscape painting from the late Middle Ages into the Renaissance… [I] could get into this more, but [it's] probably too art historical."

Staying with the *Quake* theme, Condon points us in the direction of a UK-based game artist, **Tom Betts**, who's currently exhibiting game art and multimedia work. Betts is astonishingly creative, producing works such as a 3D web browser that allows him to create lavish visualisations of the net as well as an abstract sound sequencing game and numerous audio-visual applications. His latest piece is a *Quake 3* mod, *Q-Q-Q*. He tells us a little about how he made the mod and what it was meant to accomplish: "I took about ten arenas from *Quake 3* and modified lots of shader scripts and .pak files until each level was a unique psychedelic environment. The actual map files are unchanged so you can still log on to a server and join standard deathmatches. The resulting imagery is quite painterly and hypnotic with translucent architecture and ghostly players. When the piece gets shown in an art gallery it is linked to an internet server and you can watch the online players as they play. They don't actually know that they are part of the work, but they do get

While most games are made to look realistic, the mod scene breeds artistic alternatives

GTA as it will be in 2015? No, just another example of gaming in a spun-out context








Does turning Counter-Strike into an anti-war protest really make a difference?

John Carmack's work is showing up in galleries rather a lot. But perhaps even he wouldn't recognise this as being his

a free *Quake* server!" The success of these pieces has seen Betts exhibiting around the world (as this article went to press, he was returning from exhibiting his work at the Read Me/Run Me Software Festival in Denmark).

Like Betts, Condon takes inspiration directly from his gaming activities. The Carmack piece was just another example of his attitude towards appropriating game culture for artistic ends: "I took the 3D model from the game and altered it, which is how I generally work. I don't usually make new things, but operate on the level of creative consumption. Think about it: game mods, Lego, sampling and mixing, etc. We don't really create anything any more, we just consume creatively. It's a perfect example of how our culture has changed in the era of late capitalism."

Art has always been about expressing something about the world around us – appropriating aspects of culture and transforming them. Condon feels that games are the sphere in which he moves and so his art has to express that fact. "These days whenever I meet actual game developers, or speak at game conferences, I feel like a kind of Frankenstein's monster," he explains. "I've been playing their games my whole life, you know? And here I am, like the monster returning to the master that created it, arms outstretched, mumbling: 'Give my life meaning…'"

Condon's efforts to merge games with art have recently reached epic proportions. His live-action installation Untitled War saw a Californian battle re-enactment group, the Society For Creative Anachronism, duke it out in the manner of a firstperson shooter, fighting in full armour and sticking to the rules that define a ten-minute deathmatch. A blow was taken as a frag, at which point the participant would walk from the field, only to later respawn and rejoin the fight. The field of battle for this strange war was the Machine Project gallery in Echo Park, Los Angeles.

Condon muses on where the concept for a live-action battle in a gallery had originated. "I was at an SCA war in the desert outside Pheonix and I realised how completely crazy it was that we were fighting a fake medieval war in the desert, at the same time as we were in a war in the desert in Afghanistan," he says by way of explanation. "Also, their pseudo 'resurrection' and 'capture the flag' battles were very much like FPS games. The mixture of extreme sports, roleplaying, computer games and medieval reinactment was interesting. I have done performances in the past with hired security guards and, given the history of my other work, it was just a small step for me to have an exhibition of the SCA warriors fighting in a deathmatch-style battle, complete with spectator camera views projected in the space next door. I didn't know how it was supposed to be greeted, but at the very least it was a great battle and a good party."

**Condon's mention of** Afghanistan leads to another line of thought: art is often subversive and actively political. Game developers who see themselves as artists are likely to also see themselves as counter-cultural or at least making some kind of politicised commentary. This is the flipside of the relationship between games and art: rather than being mere gallery artifacts, games are being used to subvert their own normal commercial ends and make radical political statements.

> "These days whenever I meet actual game developers, or speak at game conferences, I feel like a kind of Frankenstein's monster"

One example of the actions of politically motivated gamers came about in the anti-war protest movement Velvet-Strike, in which *Counter-Strike*



AvSeq is a sound-sequencing game in which players create patterns and audio feedback

Exhibits like AvSeq redefine art, requiring skill to be seen at their best

Art exhibits that utilise game tools have the distinct advantage of often being interactive

LA's Yuerba Buena Arts Centre found itself recreated in The Sims Online

Q-Q-Q is a psychedelic mix of textures that takes its lead from a live server

Brody Condon's fake screenshots drop game logic into real-world environments, with some interesting results

A ragged coalition of textures and shapes, some game art tries hard to conceal its origins. A close look often reveals all...

players were encouraged to disrupt games in anti-war protests or, less annoyingly, to use the spray-can graphic in-game to graffiti anti-war messages across the map. The manifesto is intelligently outlined on the internet by artist and gamer Anne-Marie Schleiner (www.opensorcery.net/velvet-strike). The site also plays host to the best of the anti-war decals and a selection of angry letters from a number of pro-war gamers.

**Such a controversial subject has meant that the team would put at risk their livelihoods in game development if they were to reveal their identities**

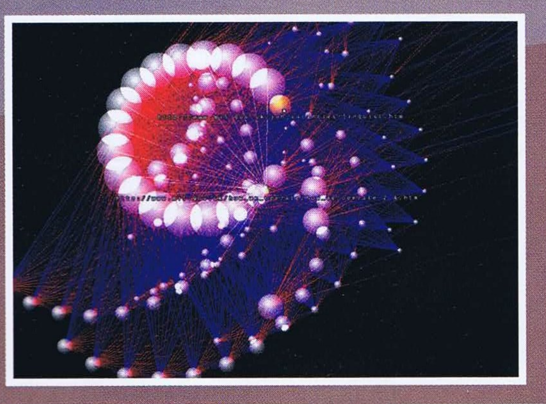
But Velvet-Strike was more political than artistic, despite its installation in a New York-based exhibition centre for the Killer Instinct Exhibition in 2003. A more balanced mix of the two forms can be found in *Escape From Woomera*, a *Half-Life* modification that attempts to raise gaming to the same level as mainstream art by generating an important commentary about Australian politics and the treatment of refugees in the Woomera detention camp. The mod, in which players take the role of prisoners escaping from the detention camp, can be downloaded from the website www.escapefromwoomera.org

The head of this modding project works under the pseudonym **Kipper** for contractual reasons. Such a controversial subject has meant that the team would put at risk their livelihoods in commercial game development if they were to reveal their identities. We ask Kipper why *Escape From Woomera* was so important.

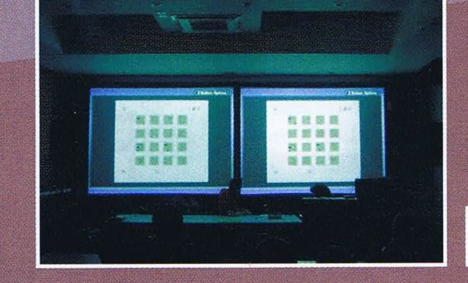
"Firstly, there are many artists using game technologies and game-culture material in their art. This is not where we're coming from. Most of us are not artists – we work as professional developers in the game industry, and we care about the state of games as an art form. Secondly, as Australian developers we're often forced to make games based on contemporary real-world events on the other side of the world, filled with pro-imperialist ideological content. We wanted to create a scenario that was significant to Australians, and give a voice to the kind of views that are almost totally unrepresented in gaming."

We ask what sort of reactions the team has received, thanks to its work. "Everything from the immigration minister making vague accusations about our project inciting people to criminal activity, to refugees in detention seeing us on the TV and cheering. But in between there have been elements who've said a game would trivialise the issue, just by virtue of being a game. The best reactions and we got tended to be from left-leaning gamers – they seemed to completely understand

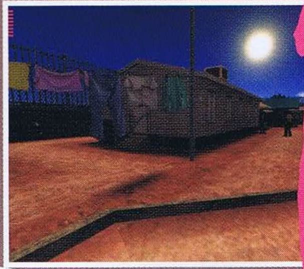




These grids are created from weblinks by Tom Bett's Webtracer program



Games are invading galleries, though Australian exhibitions have been small so far



The detention-centre conditions of Woomera are recreated in a work from anonymous Australians

what we were trying to do and said things like, 'It's about time.'"

Being both game-makers and a political hot potato for Australia, the team looked unlikely to get funding for its project, but as Kipper explains, this didn't stop them trying: "We spent about two years talking to funding bodies and the Australia Council For The Arts was brave enough in the end to help us. The major stumbling block for arts and industry funding agencies were: a) it's not commercially viable, b) it's not art, c) it's political." Nevertheless, the Australia Council For The Arts was convinced to take that step, a move that might well set an example for arts funding bodies in other countries. The Arts Council Of Britain has so far dismissed tentative queries about mod funding but, with the right mod and enough pressure, things might rapidly change. Prospective mod developers will, of course, need to learn the lessons that *Escape From Woomera* taught Kipper and her team: "The federal government was so pissed about the funding they had an inquiry and threatened to strip the council of arts funding." Fortunately for both the council and the mod team, there were no legal grounds for the government action and they were forced to back down.

**As examples such** as *Escape From Woomera* and Condon's pitched battles demonstrate, art doesn't have to be a pickled cow in a tank. Condon argues that this meeting of forms, of gamer and artist, gives us a number of reasons to be cheerful about the future of our pastime and occupation: "One: it provides gamers, a group not usually interested in the art world, a reason to pay attention to art. Most importantly in my eyes, it offers interesting alternatives and strategies for using game dev materials for personal expression. Two: it gives games and games culture a kind of respect and legitimacy that they desire from the general public. Three: at a time in the industry when suddenly advancing the technology is not the problem, but the creation of powerful game content is, artists are the force that have the education and skill set to provide them with new conceptual strategies that go beyond attempting to mimic simple Hollywood drama and escapist pulp narratives."

Of course, there's still a lot of work to be done before mainstream games really begin to feel the impact of these more experimental developments. Neither the artists nor commercial developers have yet to find a suitable middleground, but with the emerging game art scene now starting to find its legs we can perhaps expect a bright future for cross-discipline development, with its produce filling both art galleries and gamestore shelves. Equally, serious critical art using game media suggests that games are mature enough to be taken seriously. Games are no longer, if indeed they ever have been, just flickering-screen novelties with nothing to say.

## Five go arty

**Five of the weirdest game art pieces from the last year**

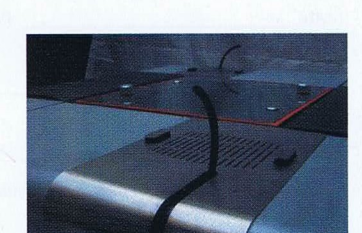
‹1› **Waco Resurrection – C-Level**
One of the most bizarre of the arthouse gaming installations was that undertaken by C-Level, an initiative to create radical game environments whose first project was a firstperson shooter based in the events surrounding the events at David Koresh's compound in Waco. Put on the Koresh helmet and experience the messianic visions.

**www.c-level.cc**

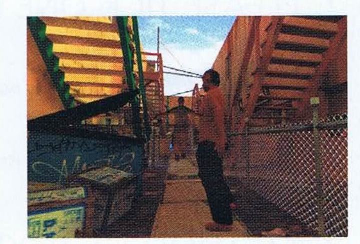


‹2› **Painstation – Fur**
Far more frightening than anything that has come out of the C-Level experiments is the *Painstation*, or *Pong* with a twist. Losing a round means the winner can inflict whip, heat and electrical damage on their opponent. The legal implications of actual physical injuries have made more recent exhibitions of this machine a little more difficult.

**www.painstation.de**

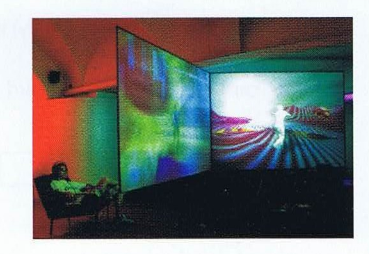


‹3› **Chinatown – Brody Condon**
"It is common these days for commercial games to recreate actual spaces, but everything is still generic and sterile," says Condon of his self-playing *Half-Life* mod. "*Chinatown* is one example of my attempts to make game spaces that retain the specificity of their original environment, and deal with issues that relate to our lived experience within that space."
**www.tmpspace.com**



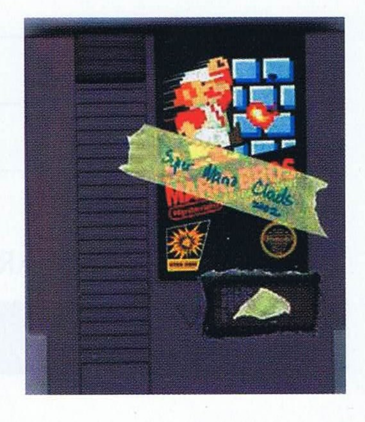
‹4› **Fluid – Fuchs & Eckermann**
*Fluid* is a meditation on themes of identity where the avatar slowly gains features via the actions of a player. An impressive *Unreal Tournament* mod, *Fluid* throws gamers into a weird psychedelic world designed by some rather spaced-sounding Germans. Impressive audiovisual installations have impressed and wowed art-going audiences.

**www.to.or.at/~fuchs-eckermann**



‹5› **Super Mario Cloud Portrait – Cory Archangel**
"I grew up as games grew up – from *Pong* to PS2. It's only natural that during my time in art school I'd eventually gravitate towards game materials and images, and wrap them around the experimental art strategies I was learning there." Archangel has created numerous game artworks, including *Super Mario Brothers* hacked to display just the scrolling clouds.

**www.beigerecords.com/cory**





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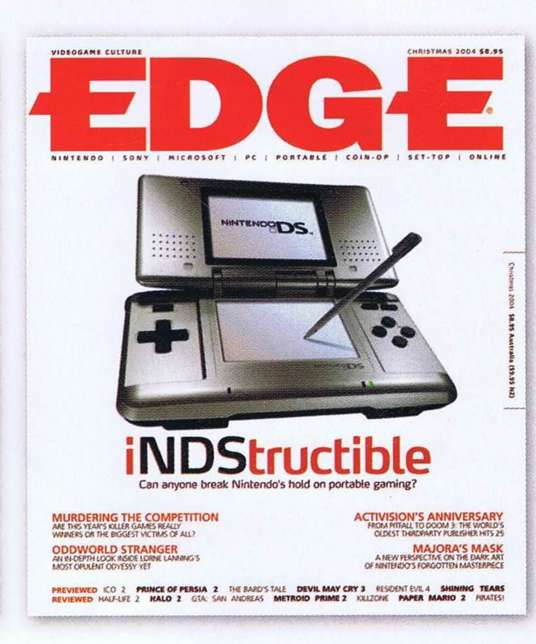
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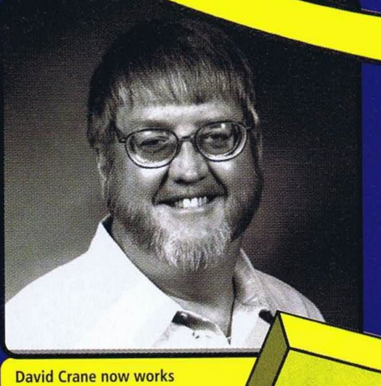
# onaries

**In 1979, Activision invented the concept of the thirdparty publisher. So, over the last 25 years, how has the company changed videogaming? And how has gaming changed Activision?**

Open an Activision manual in 1980 and you were met with a photo of the game's developer, complete with a short note thanking you for buying the game and a few insider tips for getting the most out of it. Open an Activision manual in 2004 and you're greeted with a legal warning about photosensitive seizures. Times have changed, and Activision – sometimes with precocious vision, sometimes with mismanaged desperation – has changed with them.

In the beginning, it must have sounded like the set-up for a trade-magazine joke: four game programmers/designers fresh out of Atari together with an ex-music industry executive form a company to exclusively develop and publish videogames. The punchline was that it worked, with Activision's first few years of software production commanding the attention of a fledgling videogame industry and the blossoming home market alike.

"We knew we were building something new and unique with Activision – we were the fastest-growing company in the history of American business," recalls co-founder **David Crane**. "While riding that wave



David Crane now works with fellow Activision alumni at Skyworks (www.skyworks.com), creating free-to-play games subsidised by advertisers



Kathy Vrabeck, Activision's president, who previously oversaw global publishing and brand management, joined the company back in 1999







we saw ourselves compared to other companies whose identities had become household names."

**Activision's success story** was written from a blank slate: where Atari's history dictated that much of its internal development involved cramming arcade titles into the 2600's humble architecture, Crane and his fellow designers could use its constraints to inspire game design, not curtail it: "We designed games that fitted the capabilities of the 2600, rather than trying to make the 2600 replicate an arcade game. Players could tell the difference, and that one idea probably contributed the most to the popularity of Activision games." If that was to make them popular, there was another element that would keep players returning to them again and again. (Well, two other elements, the second being the reward of badges of honour in return for photographs of stratospherically high scores.)

"A game had to be fun before it would leave the design lab," explains Crane. "That sounds obvious, but it's what many games from other companies in that era were missing, and that hurt the business. Within the design lab at Activision we all played each other's games until we felt they were the best they could be." As their own harshest critics, this process could veto even completed titles, but ensured an enviable record of quality through their 2600 catalogue.

It would also see Activision produce a hugely successful movie licence in a climate where the concrete was still setting on that glut of *ET* cartridges – Crane's own *Ghostbusters*. "Making a good movie title is surprisingly simple: you make a successful game which could stand alone without the licence, and then marry it to the property." Crane observes. "Most movie games died due to a lack of development time. With *Ghostbusters*, I had a half-finished game that I could re-task, which gave me enough time to concentrate on making it play well."

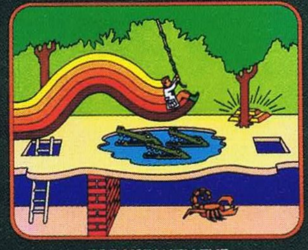
The mid-'80s slump following the 2600's twilight found

"A game had to be fun before it would leave the design lab. It's what many games from other companies in that era were missing"



## TWENTY-FIVE YEARS IN SIX PAGES

**Activision's history mapped out via key titles since 1979**




1982: Specifically designed for home hardware (although its sequel was, ironically, converted to coin-op form), Pitfall was a big early success



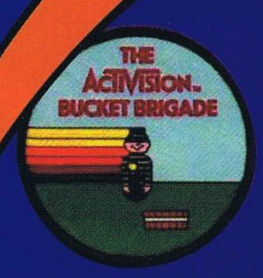

1982: Carol Shaw's instant classic was a broadside to the hull of an industry bewildered by the concept of a female game designer




1983: The Challenger was the American Dream, and Activision, being American dreamers, decided to coax a simulator out of the 2600




1984: Released on various 8bit machines, HERO, with its distinctive implementation of inertia and dark, sprawling levels, was ahead of its time











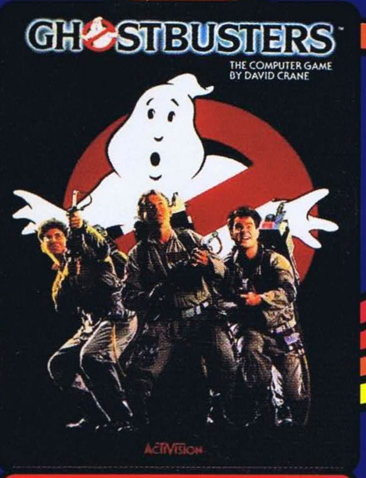


Activision – and the thirdparty providers that had sprouted in its wake – re-adjusting to the home computer market. "The 2600 was very well suited for reaction games, but the larger memory and long-term storage of home computers lent themselves to different kinds of games," says Crane. And Activision's games were very different, far ahead of their time in exploring and expanding player/game interaction, from the paranoiac *Hacker* titles to Crane's unsung *Sims* precursor *Little Computer People* to 'computer novel' *Portal*.

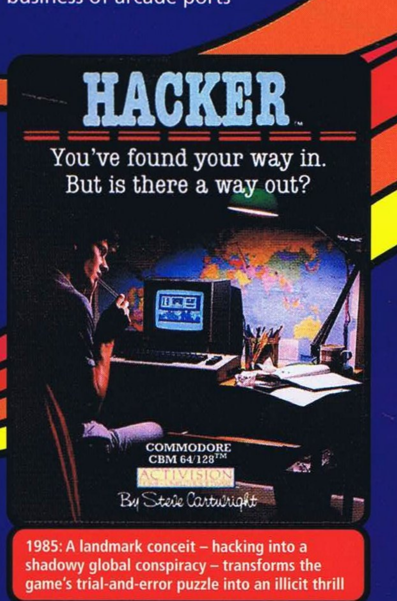
Though it was a period of creativity that few developers have matched, these titles would not find the same runaway success as the games of the console boom, and planned continuations of *LCP* and *Portal* were shelved. "It's not so much that the market wasn't ready for experimental titles – it simply wasn't big enough to support them," says Crane. "Experiences like *LCP* were very well received, but very well received by a small percentage of the market. Later, the market grew enough that you could make a commercially viable product appealing only to that small percentage."

**In 1986, Activision** would cross paths with another fiercely independent creator struggling with a changing market: text-adventure giant Infocom, which was reeling from a failed attempt to expand into the business sector. The merger between the two should have been more than a marriage of convenience, but relations broke down as founding staff drifted away from both, finding their companies' directions squandered. Crane, along with the last of the original cadre of designers, would leave his company a year later. "Activision's management at the time had no creative vision at all," he explains. "I left when I could no longer affect the future of the company."

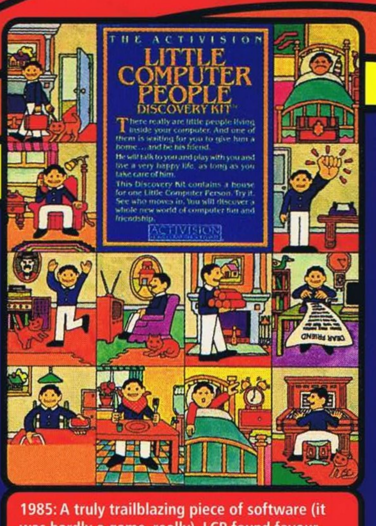
That future would show little indication of learning from the past. The company sidelined the Activision name to become Mediagenic, signifying an intent to produce business software in addition to games – a change of focus which would prove as misguided as it had for Infocom. Under Mediagenic, Activision was reduced to a product line resting heavily on the very business of arcade ports



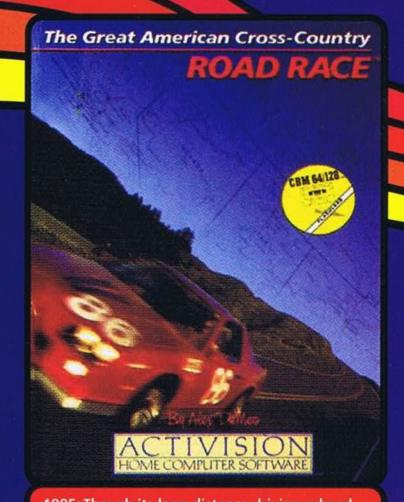

1984: The triumph of Crane's punchy action interpretation was in eschewing Venkman and co to let the player be the Ghostbusters




1985: A landmark conceit – hacking into a shadowy global conspiracy – transforms the game's trial-and-error puzzle into an illicit thrill

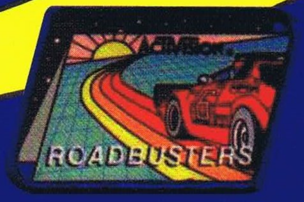



1985: A truly trailblazing piece of software (it was hardly a game, really), LCP found favour with critics but that did not translate to sales




1985: Though its long-distance driving echoed the 2600's Enduro, the continental context gave players the chance to live that road-trip dream







that had dissatisfied the founders (and the players of their games) ten years earlier. And its re-release of *The Manhole* as 'the first interactive entertainment product on CD-ROM' guaranteed it an historical footnote, but not a market, with CD-ROM technology still far from commonplace.

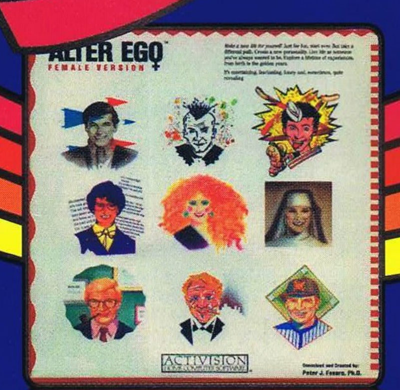
Though the Mediagenic years were not without notable successes, such as the three BattleTech licensed games, they would be overshadowed by the continued disintegration of both Infocom – which all but closed down along with its Boston headquarters in 1989 – and of the company itself. Despite successive cost-cutting staff layoffs, Mediagenic was near-bankrupt by the start of the '90s, at which point it was bought out by investment company BHK Corporation: the vestiges of Mediagenic would file for Chapter 11, that now-infamous Orwellian swansong for American publishers, in January 1992. The new management reinstated the Activision name, gathered up the pieces, and took them to Hollywood.

Something less than a shadow of its former self – "When it was moved to Los Angeles there were only three employees left on the payroll," Crane notes – this third incarnation of Activision faced the new decade bloody-nosed, a stark contrast to its starry-eyed entrance into the previous one. No less determined, though, it set about re-establishing itself within the PC market, with *Return To Zork's* savvy proposition of FMV spectacle and nostalgia finding commercial success and, critically, media attention. The troubled in-house development of *MechWarrior 2* would redeem itself upon its long-overdue release by becoming another major success.

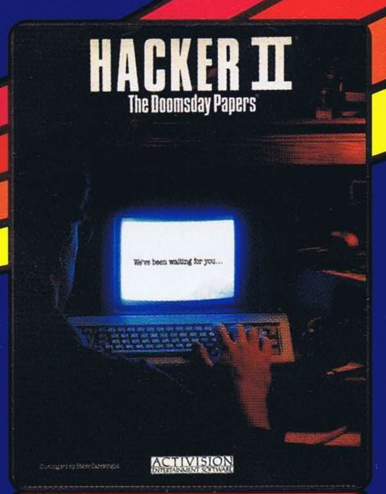
But as the 32bit era loomed, Activision was becoming increasingly aware that a shift back to console gaming would be crucial for its continued growth. After trying a number of approaches – converting its successful PC titles (such as *Civilisation 2* and an 'arcade version' of *MechWarrior 2*) or forging alliances with its new Hollywood



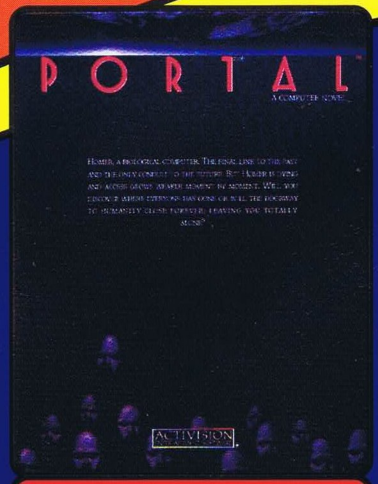

1987: Created by a fledgling Westwood, this compelling tactical RPG offered hours of Kurita soldier-stomping and a maddening endgame



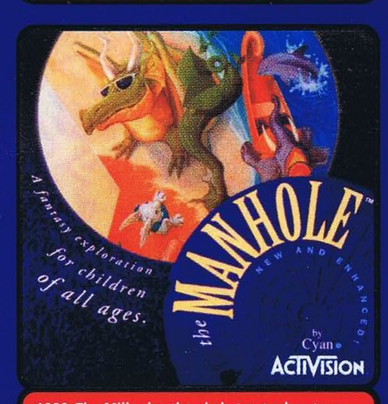

1986: A psychology experiment with a GUI, this opportunity to guide a virtual life from birth to death was released in male and female versions




1986: A more sober, and brainy, affair than the first, involving frantic security-camera feed-splicing to remotely infiltrate a Soviet facility

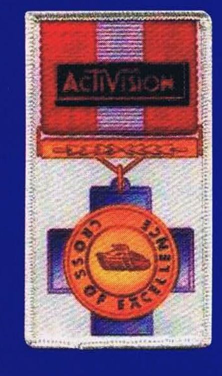



1986: Rob Swigert provides one of the best sci-fi stories ever to grace a monitor, but Portal's interactive narration was just as impressive




1989: The Miller brothers' abstract adventure, told in HyperCard, would set the unhurried, dreamlike tone for their later Myst universe






neighbours (with the ill-fated *Judge Dredd* and the Bruce Willis-fronted shooter *Apocalypse*), the company came to realise it was a journey best undertaken by skateboard. The proposition did not look as tempting in 1999 as it looks now: skateboarding was a marginalised pursuit and Tony Hawk far from a household name. What Neversoft crafted was a new kind of gaming, grafting old-school demands of dexterity and perseverance onto a crowd-pleasingly edgy and urban world. Its success, commercially and critically, re-established the Activision name.

**Five years and** six games later, the Tony Hawk brand has also come to represent a defining factor of the modern Activision – the reliance on licences.

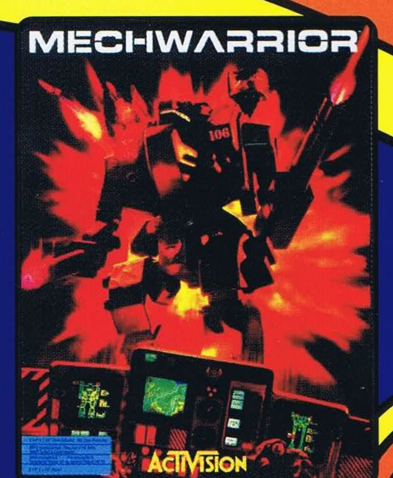
**Kathy Vrabeck**, the company's president, is quick to correct that assumption: "Tony Hawk isn't a licence. We came up with that concept and then went out and attached an athlete to it. Last year, almost 100 per cent of our revenue came from original IP." But while it's true that original franchises – whether established, such as *Total War*, or burgeoning, such as *Call Of Duty* – make up an important component of the Activision roster, movie tie-ins have always underpinned its business. Star Wars to Shrek, Spider-Man to Toy Story – names that have a recognition even PlayStation would envy. Does Vrabeck think this licence dependence is a worry?

"Not from our perspective. The majority of people who game are much lighter users than the hardcore sector. They're still playing football,




**"The majority of people who game are much lighter users than the hardcore sector. They're still playing football and watching television"**



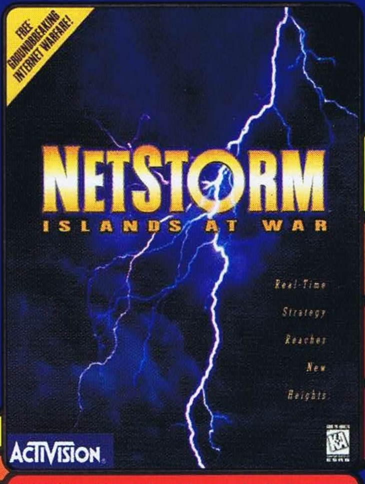
1989: Dynamix (later to create the Starsiege franchise for Sierra) produces an RPG/sim still seen by many as the definitive BattleTech title



1993: Though it bore only the most passing connection to the Zork universe, RTZ was the ubiquitous darling of the FMV generation

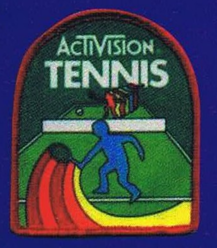


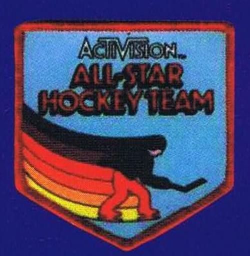
1995: Despite the loss of the original's between-mission maneuverings, the in-house MechWarrior is a memorably stark combat sim



1997: Titanic's maiden title was also its last – banking on net multiplay too early, it left the New Age Rampart-styled RTS an unsung delight












watching television, going to the cinema and dating and they don't have time to research games very heavily – and they're looking at a very expensive purchase."

The solution Activision has found to court this market is to combine well-known brands and heavyweight titles that could attract more selective players. Vrabek is unconvinced by the notion of releasing more minority-interest games at the kind of lower prices that might encourage experimentation: "As of yet retailers and consumers haven't proven themselves sophisticated enough to

**Having invented thirdparty development, blown it and then rebuilt it, Activision has now settled in to a new business model**

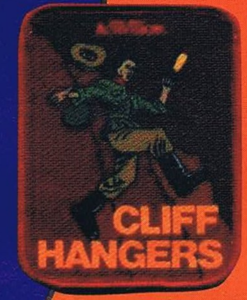
marketing. "We're actually spending more on marketing than we spend on game development – it depends from game to game what that ratio looks like, but game development itself costs so much you hate to invest that much and then not have people know about the game," confirms Vrabeck.

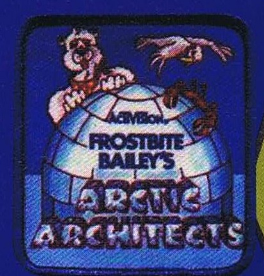
Committing to such substantial mainstream marketing has lead to Activision's policy of cancellations of titles it felt were not guaranteed top sellers – original properties *Trinity* and *Dead Rush* have both fallen victim to the cull. Those that survive will be assured big advertising spends, but it's a policy that has no room for niche

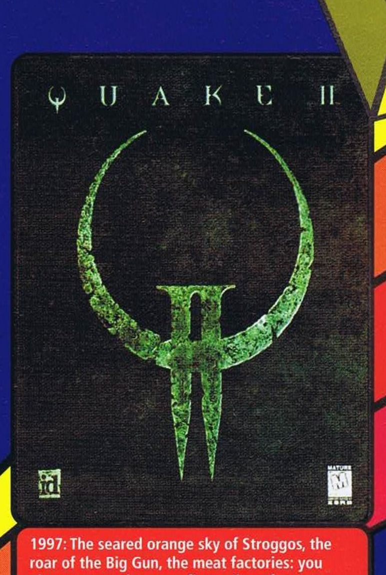
figure out how much value they're going to get from a specific game." It seems in Crane's era the market was sophisticated enough but too small; in Vrabeck's the market is big enough but not smart enough .

But while massmarket can equate to dumbing down (as evidenced by disappointments like *Spider-Man: The Movie* and *Indiana Jones: The Emperor's Tomb*), recent Activision history has seen a steady increase in quality and diversity. Having invented thirdparty development, blown it and then rebuilt it, Activision has now settled in to a new business model. By the mid-'90s, the company had again grown to a size which was atrophying internal creativity. Even teams working on successful games,





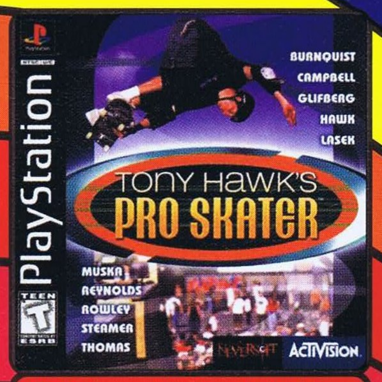


1997: The seared orange sky of Stroggos, the roar of the Big Gun, the meat factories: you always remember your first railgun frag



1998: This Cold War space war – from the team that would seed Pandemic – was a true return to form for '80s-era Activision creativity



1999: A strong candidate for a defining PS1 game, Hawk lent his name to a game that redefined a firm not known for its street smarts



2002: Lawrence Holland's Totally Games didn't quite repeat that Tie Fighter magic, but the firstperson bridge-stalking is still inspired



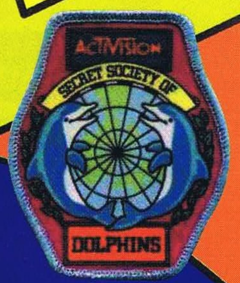
such as *Battlezone*, were starting to feel hemmed in.

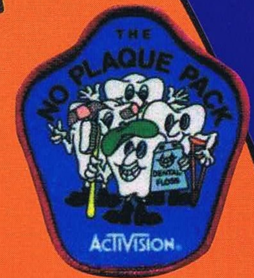
"We found that managing all these teams within the building – with projects that were shutting down or finishing, moving people on to another team and then having to deal with all the corporate stuff they get caught up in – it wasn't working. So we spun out a lot of the teams." Vrabeck explains the decision lightly, but the supportive way in which Activision released frustrated teams was truly remarkable. Fledgling devcos could walk out with Activision funding, access to the IP they'd been working on and publishing deals guaranteed for the first few years of their life. For some it still wasn't enough to guarantee success. For others, like Pandemic, it saw them through a rocky start and established them as a major new creative force.

Nowadays, Activision has no pure in-house development. Instead, alongside its publishing deals, it pursues a policy of acquisition, often fully buying teams only after a successful commercial relationship has been proven (as with Neversoft, Grey Matter, Treyarch and Infinity Ward). "Now we've moved to a phase where we do have developers but they remain very independent," explains Vrabeck. "They keep their name, they keep their own buildings, and we take over some of the admin – payroll, employee benefits. We own them and so we have the advantages of not paying royalties and that kind of thing, but we let them manage themselves." It's one part of the Activision ideal to which the company has striven to stay true: the developer's name always makes the front of the box. Vrabeck is proud to assert that the company "very much values the developer part of the videogame model" – an old sentiment expressed in a disconcertingly modern manner.

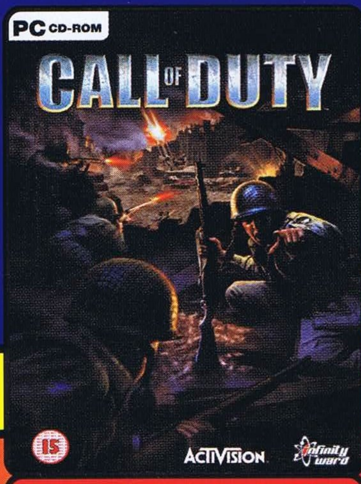
There are some things even a quarter-century of progress doesn't change – Activision has always been about profit. Crane is the first to admit that for all the nostalgic remembrances of his infant company, "we were a business in business to make money. We held to certain ideals, not for idealistic reasons, but because we had a vision as to how to make the best games. And the best games will sell best." These days, it's self-evident that the best games don't have that luxury, and Activision has only achieved its enormous success by adjusting to those new market conditions. For Crane, a bad game wouldn't sell, no matter how popular the licence attached to it was. For Vrabeck, a bad licence will kill a title, no matter how good the game is. For Crane, Activision was about enabling risk, for Vrabeck it's about minimising it. The challenge that Activision now faces is to nurture the creative independence of developers, while successfully managing the rising costs of communicating that creativity to an increasingly vast, increasingly distracted audience. It's a balance it's struck magnificently with *Rome: Total War*, which we review on page 104. The Creative Assembly has produced a title that is as remarkable for its gaming excellence as for its imaginative marketing: there could hardly be a better blueprint for gaming's next 25 years.



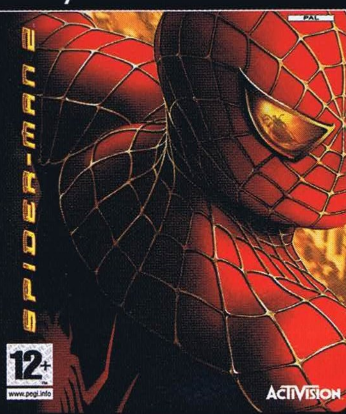



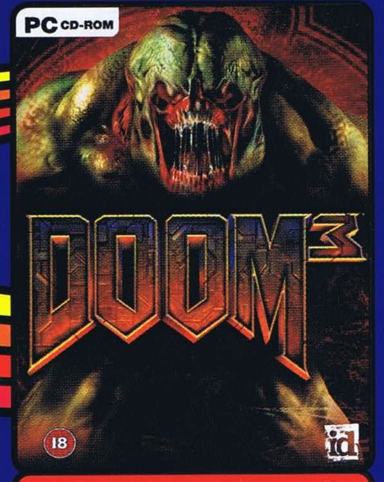

Activision badges courtesy of Atari-Age (www.atariage.com)



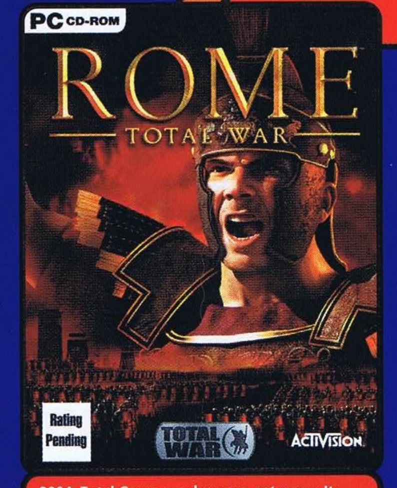

2003: With excellent production values, Call Of Duty was Infinity Ward showing the rest of the world how to do a WWII-themed shooter




2004: Treyarch proves licences are often at their best when capturing the essence of a character rather than copying the letter of the film




2004: If not quite The Third Coming predicted by its excitable fanbase, id's Martian ghost-train ride is still a satisfying popcorn shocker




2004: Total Game may be more apt name. Its use in Decisive Battles series on the History channel brings its brilliance to a new audience

# Review

New games assessed in words and numbers




072 GTA: San Andreas
PS2

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078 Halo 2
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PC

084 Jak 3
PS2

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PC

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GC

088 Monster Hunter
PS2

089 Advance Guardian Heroes
GBA

089 Gametrak: Dark Wind
PS2





090 Blood Will Tell
PS2

091 The Getaway: Black Monday
PS2

092 Need For Speed Underground 2
PS2, XBOX, PC, GC

093 Warhammer 40K: Dawn of War
PC

094 Final Fantasy XI
PS2, PC

095 Sly 2: Band Of Thieves
PS2, XBOX, GC, PC, GBA

096 Sega Superstars
PS2

097 EyeToy: Play 2
PS2

098 FlatOut
PC, PS2, XBOX

099 Super Mario Ball
GBA

099 X-Men Legends
PS2, XBOX


**Edge's** scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three, 4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven, 8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten

## Now playing...

### Phantom Brave




**It's simply bottomless, as Failure Dungeons and GREAT! gramophones reveal hidden strategic depths. Still frustrating but unquestionably fascinating.**
PS2 (NIPPON ICHI)

### Super Monkey Ball




**It's been said before, but the cries of delight *SMB* can provoke from a first-time gamer, especially after a strike at bowling, are divine. Introduce someone yourself today.**
GC (NINTENDO)

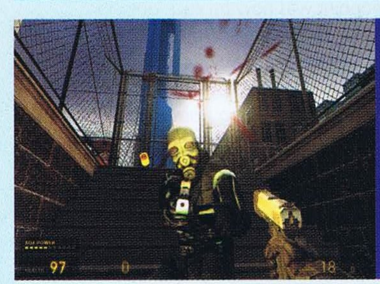
### The Saga Of Ryzom



**Two evenings, two new MMOs. In one you're attacked, mugged and insulted within seconds. In the other you're saved, befriended and amazed. The second one is *Ryzom*...**
PC (NEVRAX)

## The future is now

### PC gaming cleans the slate




With Half-Life 2, Valve has marked the beginning of a new generation of videogames. You'll need to own a fairly hefty PC to play it, of course

This might be the most expensive issue of **Edge** you've ever bought. It may say it costs $8.95 on the cover, but it's very possible that buying it may in turn leave your pockets four figures lighter. And, believe it or not, that's a good thing.

*Doom 3* may have carried a sting of disappointment, but its unquestionable power has drawn a line in the sand. We are entering a new era for PC gaming. *Half-Life 2* is a truly exceptional game. Beautiful in a way that prizes aesthetic, mood and communication above empty technical achievement. Mature in a way that has nothing to do with headshots and thongs and everything to do with a medium finally finding its form. This is a game that builds on everything which has gone before, a game that has learned from thousands of mistakes and studied hundreds of triumphs. Which is not to suggest that it's calculating what it needs to do to better all those before it, *Half-Life 2* is a game that's taken Valve this long to wrap up so it can be the best game it can.

This point in the console cycle is always a strange time for gaming. Current hardware is plateauing, its true capabilities having been gradually discovered and exploited. Next-gen rumours are spreading, as early movies and hyperbolic press releases seep out there. Half the industry is saying it's going to be about graphics, the other half saying that's the one thing it can't be about any more. No one quite knows what's going to happen next. Or do they? Pages 76 and 77 are likely to shake that feeling. Valve knows. PC owners know.

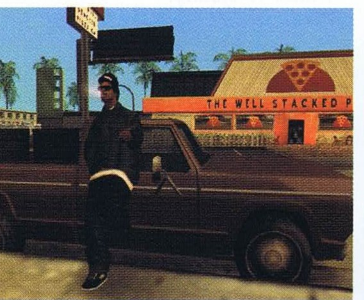
What's going to happen next is everything. *Half-Life 2* points the way to a future for games where nothing is too much trouble. It sets an agenda that says games are free to tackle as much or as little as they like, but anything they tackle they have to perfect. Whether it's storytelling or character creation or tactical depth, funnelled set-pieces or open-ended gameplay, real-world physics or brutally forceful gunplay, games have to excel. The excuse that 'it's just a game' won't cut it any more. That's what next-gen means, and that's what *Half-Life 2* delivers.

So, if you're not a PC gamer, forget that $8.95. You may find it hard to get through the next few pages without preparing to splash out an awful lot more.



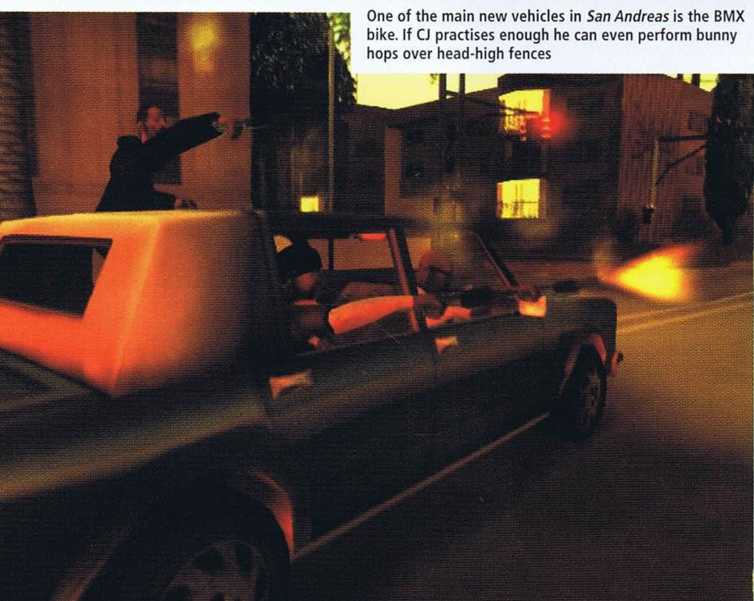
# GTA: SAN ANDREAS

FORMAT: **PS2** PRICE: **$99.95** RELEASE: **OUT NOW**
PUBLISHER: **TAKE 2**
DEVELOPER: **ROCKSTAR NORTH**






**One of the main new vehicles in *San Andreas* is the BMX bike. If CJ practises enough he can even perform bunny hops over head-high fences**

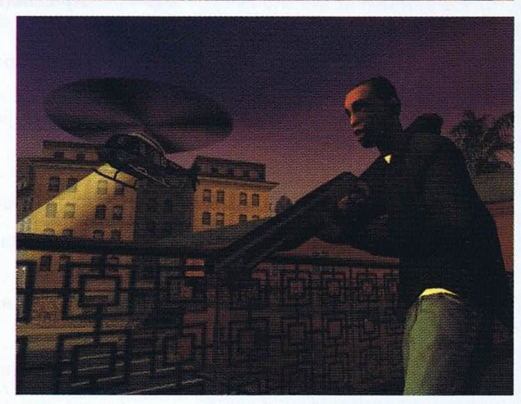


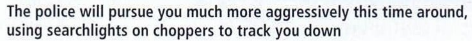



While the last two additions to the *GTA* series stood out from their contemporaries on a number of levels, perhaps most intriguing from a critical standpoint was how on each occasion Rockstar served up a gaming experience that so emphatically outweighed the sum of its parts. Both *GTAIII* and *Vice City* baffled their detractors by suffering from a catalogue of technical flaws and countless gameplay inadequacies yet somehow managing to come together as seemingly unsurpassable benchmarks of their generation. Unsurprisingly, Rockstar has refrained from emblazoning the packaging of San Andreas with bullet points pertaining to the enormity of the game world, specific additions to the formula or the incredible diversity of gameplay on offer, as once again it isn't the palette of colours but the overall masterpiece they paint that will leave player expectations in San Andreas' dust right out of the blocks.

Arguably the key to the series' underlying appeal is the immensely gratifying sensation of being totally immersed in the living, breathing metropolis that plays host to the action, coupled with the equally alluring invitation to freely explore and exploit its many riches. Clearly wise to the attraction, Rockstar has focussed much of its energy on taking these core benefits to the next level and bringing San Andreas to life with unrivalled vivacity. The violent gang warfare that peaked in LA's ghetto communities during the early nineties provides the setting for this year's gratuitous flirtation with censorship, and lead protagonist Carl "CJ" Johnson's gangsta-ravaged neighbourhood is recreated with such lavish character it's unavoidable to become immediately engrossed in the period.

Every area in the game oozes with its own distinctive, authentic flavour, each complete with an immense cast of residents whose enhanced intellect and repertoire of interactions ensure the background is forever teeming with life. Yet while such diversity impresses within the *Vice City*-dwarfing confines of Los Santos' sprawling suburbs

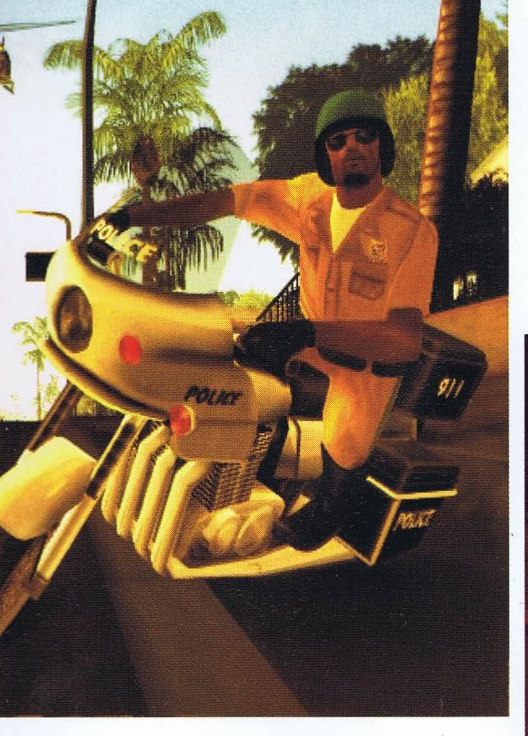


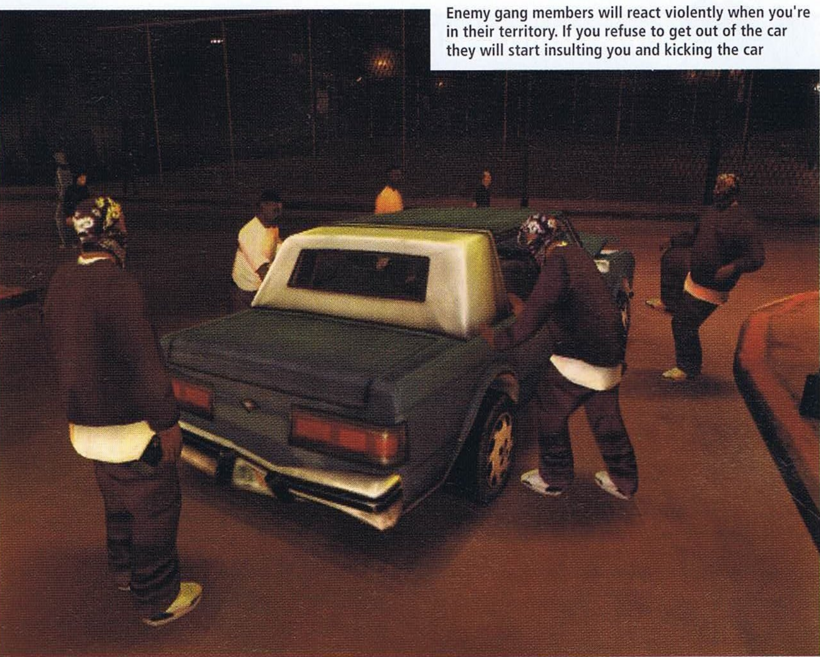


**The police will pursue you much more aggressively this time around, using searchlights on choppers to track you down**







Enemy gang members will react violently when you're in their territory. If you refuse to get out of the car they will start insulting you and kicking the car

alone, the game world's mind-boggling scale only really hits home on realisation that this initially unlocked region covers a mere quarter of the entire state map. The bright lights of San Fierro and Las Venturas await, but the unlikely sightseeing highlight comes from exploring the quaint rural townships and vast rural expanses separating the urban districts.

The theme of mass expansion extends far beyond an environmental level however, as the platter of options for fleshing out your everyday life between missions has been similarly designed with players who enjoy regular jaunts from the beaten track firmly in mind. While hours could be spent leisurely exploiting Vice City's non-linear potential, San Andreas comes loaded with literally months' worth of supplementary entertainment. Aside from indulging in a mammoth compendium of mini-games and side missions, the all-new role-playing component introduces such considerations as attribute development, maintaining romantic relationships and even sculpting your character's body shape through a combination of diet and exercise. Yet again, while none of these peripheral touches are particularly enthralling on their own, it's their cumulative effect that provides such powerful enrichment to your virtual existence.

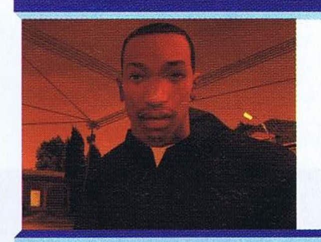


**It's a predictable, yet remarkably well executed sequel recipe. The majority of complaints levelled at its predecessors have been all but ironed out**

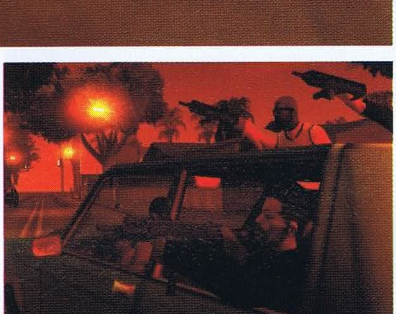
The mission catalogue itself has also been subjected to an impressive overhaul, offering a far more imaginatively designed selection of tasks than in previous outings and featuring a truly mesmerising variety of gameplay that continues to dish up novelty right until the credits roll. A notably refined targeting system finally turns shootouts into a highly playable proposition rather than a chore, and although such additions as stealth play and rhythm-action challenges inevitably feel watered-down when compared with the cream of their respective genres, as with most segments these are carried off with just enough style and substance to make an entertaining contribution to the package.

It's a predictable, yet remarkably well executed sequel recipe. The majority of complaints levelled at its predecessors have been all but ironed out, gameplay has been tightened up across the board and core strengths heavily built upon to tantalizing effect. Yet while an extensive wish list has been superbly addressed, visual problems remain the game's Achilles heel. Woes persist with polygon counts, draw distances, pop-up, clipping and frame rate, albeit to a thankfully diluted degree. Such a distinct lack of polish does feel horribly out of place, but since these factors are simply too outgunned to afflict the all-important immersion factor we are again returned to the same paradox – just how important is the quality of individual components when the outcome they create is so truly outstanding? **[10]**

## Starz n the 'hood

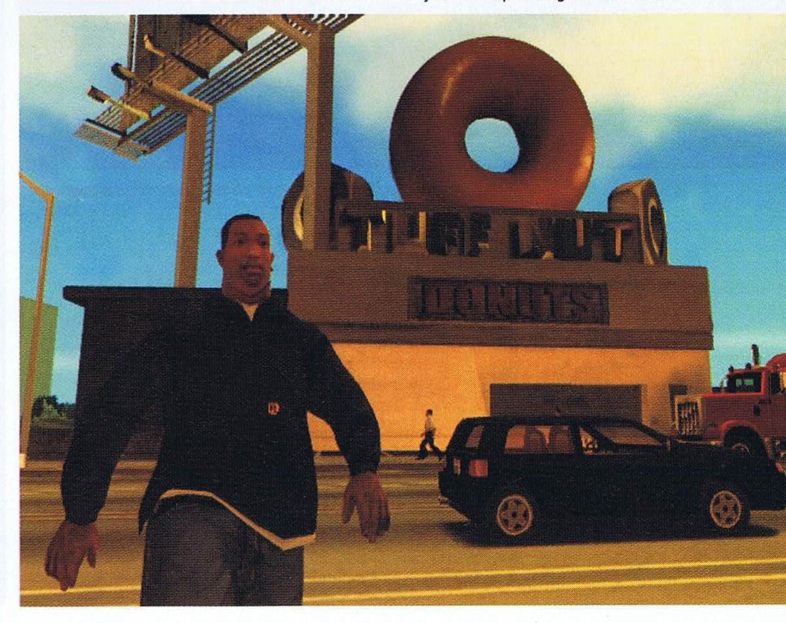


**While Hollywood heavyweights James Woods, Samuel L. Jackson and Peter Fonda turn in predictably strong performances, it's the relatively unknown cast handling the majority of the story's central roles that deserve particular applause for bringing their characters to life so memorably. Their convincing and often hilarious personalities are strong enough to override the lack of polygons in their character models, and play a fundamental part in weaving the rich tapestry that holds San Andreas' diverse platter of gameplay snippets together so firmly.**





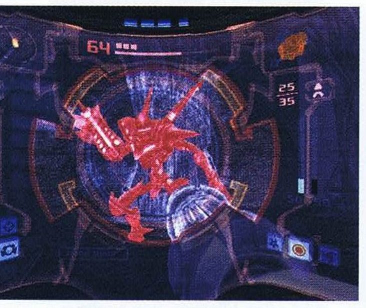
There are various food outlets scattered around San Andreas. If you eat too much you'll end up looking like the CJ below

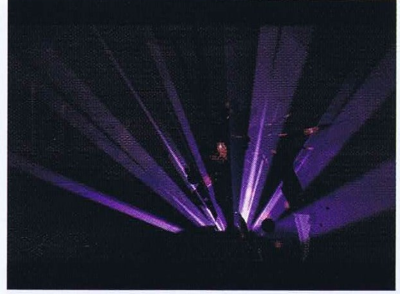




# METROID PRIME 2: ECHOES

FORMAT: GAMECUBE PRICE: $99.95 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: RETRO STUDIOS





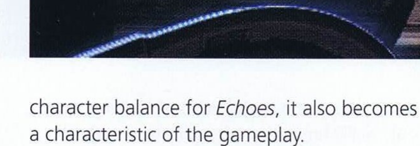
The Space-Pirates are once again in your way, however, they too are under threat from the planet's natives and another foe whom they've had much trouble with





The concept of duality has always been a strong thematic focal point for any story dealing with opposing forces – most commonly referring to those that are of good nature and, well, those that aren't. *Metroid Prime 2: Echoes* takes this literary and philosophical concept of duality and incorporates it into virtually every aspect of how *Echoes* unfolds.

Aether, the planet in which galactic bounty hunter Samus Aran's latest adventure takes place, exists on two dimensions - one light, the other dark. Among the many life forms that inhabit Aether are two dominant races, the benevolent, light-loving 'Luminoth' and the violent, shadow-dwelling 'Ing.' Using Aether as a mining colony, the space pirates that featured so prominently in the original *Metroid* have returned for *Echoes*, but they too have their nemesis in the form of the humanoid galactic federation. Finally, Aran herself is not alone on aether as a strange individual known as 'Dark Samus,' is also present. This use of duality truly is not only prevalent in terms of plot construction and



character balance for *Echoes*, it also becomes a characteristic of the gameplay.

A few hours into *Metroid Prime 2: Echoes* and the game doesn't feel like a true sequel to what many consider to be one of the GameCube's hallmark titles. Instead it feels more like an extension, more of the same in a different setting. Considering the source material, this is not a huge detriment to the title, it simply confirms that Retro Studios have successfully recreated the sense of isolation and discovery that made their original title one that stood out.

Exploring the surroundings in *Echoes* works much the same way as it did in its predecessor, where the narrative unfolds through the examination of terminals,





The game's progression, in the way of upgrades, has allowed for an expansion of Samus' weapons through clever plot development. While she loses her abilities early in the game, regaining them quickly allows for a greater upgrade story arc

The many modes of multiplayer should have Metroid aficiandos chomping at the bit with more than just a regular deathmatch option - it's very Nintendo

creatures (both alive and deceased), journal logs and various other objects. Through their findings, the player gradually learns the intricities of a planetary struggle between two races. This time there are many more factions adding sides to a multi-facted story, namely the Space Pirates, Galactic Federation, Luminoth and Ing. It's through comparing the information gathered from each race that you can make sense of impending doom facing Aether, and consequently find the only true point of singularity within the game. So after initially feeling more like an unimaginatiive extension as opposed to a sequel, *Echoes* truly comes into its own as the players begins to fully grasp the dual nature of every issue they face.

For example, activating a switch can possibly have a cross dimensional effect and open up a new pathway not only in the dimension you currently preside in but in its polar opposite as well. So it's here, with the whole aspect of light and dark, forces of unknown origin, and other mystical, eldritch



## The epic and symbiotic nature of the story and gameplay found in Echoes make it the most ambitous title in the Metroid franchise yet

This paves the way for deeper puzzles, more intricately designed locations to explore, and most importantly, a far more challenging experience. The idea has also been applied to result in new weapons, suit upgrades and items that reflect duality – most predictably in the form of the light and dark beam weapons. As expected, the light beam will damage creatures that are native to dark Aether and vice versa. Logical, but in no way innovative.

A less predictable, yet more prominent use of the concept exists in the exploration of the planet itself. As Aether exists on two dimensions, one light the other dark, the player will find that travelling and interacting with each version of the planet has a very natural, intuitive cause and effect setup. Changing something in dark Aether could change something in its light counterpart.

aspects that propels *Echoes* into the realm of moralistic fantasy that the original Prime only touched on.

This isn't to say that *Echoes* isn't a science fiction driven game, it is. It simply means that this is a title that is assured in its goal to elevate itself above its predecessor. Retro Studios set the bar very high for themselves with Echoes and for the most part everything in this game exceeds what was presented in the original. The presentation and production values are of a quality rarely seen in a Nintendo in-house title, and it features some of the best art direction of any game released this year. The epic and symbiotic nature of the story and gameplay found in *Echoes* make it the most ambitious title in the *Metroid* franchise yet, one that is every bit a brilliant as its already impresive predecessor. **[9]**

### Multiplayer Metroid



***Metroid Prime*** **was not a firstperson shooter, so the amicable attempt to insert a fully fledged multiplayer mode in, feels a little tacked on. An adventure game played from the first-person perspective turned into four-player death match is about as good as can be expected, leaving Gamecube owners still waiting for a noteworthy multiplayer firstperson title to default to… And of course, a controller that lends itself to dual analogue twitch gaming.**










Ravensholme is littered with traps that can be used both to slay the ubiquitous zombies and to negotiate the streets and alleyways Freeman must traverse



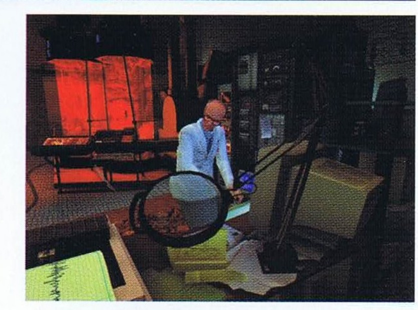
# HALF-LIFE 2

**FORMAT:** PC **PRICE:** $99.95 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
**PUBLISHER:** VIVENDI
**DEVELOPER:** VALVE

Firstperson shooters since *Half-Life*, at least on the PC, have been unsatisfying footnotes to the events of 1998. A smattering of ideas have crashlanded in the ballpark, but everyone is still playing the same game. We've seen better special effects, even some new material to work with, but there's still been a sense of deflation with each new title. Nothing on PCs has quite managed to repeat the fine melody with which *Half-Life* was orchestrated. But firstperson shooters haven't become outmoded, they've not even lost their way. They've simply not managed to do what we thought they could do. *Half-Life 2*, on the other hand, does *exactly* what we thought they could do. Those unrealised visions of intensity, action, drama and relentless challenge weren't just a figment – Valve knew that. The genre still has a way forward and the Seattle team has found it. Yes, it's a linear shooter: a magnificent, breathtaking paragon of the form. *Half-Life 2* takes the squad-based elements, the vehicles, the physics, the gorgeous good looks, the whole sedimentary block of genre conceits and carves out a masterpiece. This isn't about doing things differently to anyone else, it's about doing them *better*.

How is that possible? Well, it's largely about timing. The set-pieces are, almost without exception, supremely effective. A giant strider tripod crashing through a building, a zombie bursting from a door, a floating-barrel counterbalance puzzle, a duel with a helicopter, a line uttered by an otherwise inconsequential character – whatever it is, it comes barrelling in, pitch perfect to the very second of delivery. And it never stops. *Half-Life 2* never lets up; it's a high-bandwidth cascade of challenges.

The cops don't have much time for chat and are eager to put a bullet in Freeman's hide. These early metrocops are pretty weak and work in numbers to be of any great threat



Graphical touches like this magnifying lens are typical of Valve's high standards of design and attention to detail

There is no time for repetition or monotony. The sheer urgency with which the player is propelled through the game sees to that. Few games have such a qualified sense of drama. *Half-Life 2* tells a story in which you are swept along without feeling helpless.

The intensity of chase scenes, the gut-wrenching loss of friends, the grim brutality of killing – all these experiences are delivered with astonishing vitality. The characters win hearts and raise suspicions. The acting, their movement, their facial expressions, all seem imbued with *humanity*. The city itself, awe-inspiring, oppressive and terrifying in equal measure, is flawlessly designed. You are *embedded* in this world.

And no, Gordon Freeman never speaks. No cut-scenes, no muttered voiceover. This seemingly sinister quirk is elegantly handled, gently transformed into a joke by the other characters. Alyx, the core female character, laughs and shakes her head, while Yoda-type aliens mutter things in their own language after informing the player, politely, that they would only ever speak in their native tongue if they wished to say something rude.





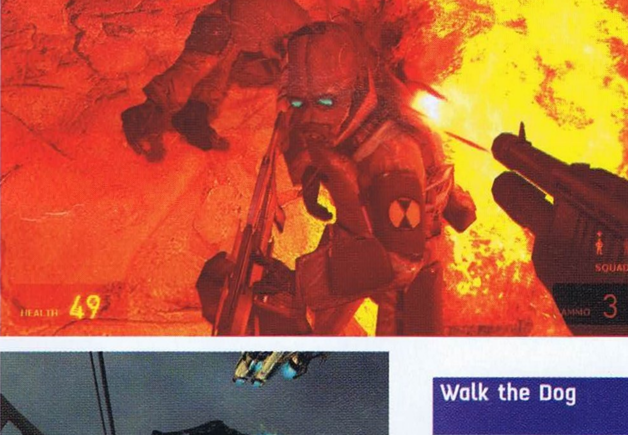
Barney never does get around to buying you that beer, but he does lead an effective coup against the totalitarian government. Without his help, Gordon Freeman would be completely helpless






Large sections of the game have squads following the player. Simple to manage, their chatter is charming and often sad






The striders are formidable foes and can't be beaten without rockets. They stalk players under cover, and will even bend down and try to climb into wrecked buildings

All of this brilliance takes place within a framework of sensational technical achievement. The Source engine might not have *Doom 3*'s fearsome lighting, but it nevertheless believably renders everything from a vast brutalist skyscraper to the peeling paint on a tenement wall. The striders, the towering tripedal robots that hunt the army of rebels along the streets, are wonderful to behold. Death occurs on numerous occasions simply from the awesome need to look and gape. Even in the large outdoor spaces, such as the high-speed journey along a temperate coastline, Source remains unfazed. There are a few examples of textures being too stretched and bland, but the naysayers who are liable to worry about that will have bigger things on their minds… such as the physics.



**The striders, the tripedal robots, are wonderful to behold. Death occurs on numerous occasions simply from the awesome need to look and gape**

Finally we have a game in which physics are more than just an excuse for ragdoll deaths. Gone is the Mr Magoo effect of running around banging into things and knocking them over. This time the world is there to be *grasped*. Within moments of *Half-Life 2*'s opening scenes a vicious metrocop throws a drink can on the floor and insists that you pick it up and put it in the bin. In that moment the player is equipped with everything they need to know about the world. And these moments continue – the game constantly teaches us something and then presents a challenge to be overcome by applying what has been learned. This is never more true than in using the gravity gun. This is the core tool, and it's what makes *Half-Life 2* simply sing with entertainment. It can be used to drag objects, pick them up and carry them about. Its second mode can be used to drop, throw or smash them away. The applications for this spread wide indeed. Initially, it's about hurling metal discs through the bodies of encroaching zombies; later it finds an application knocking over the buggy and getting it upright, or dislodging weird sticky mines, or picking up a filing cabinet to use as a shield or a battering ram. Tearing a radiator from a wall and using it to swat a parasitic headcrab, while all the furniture in a room goes tumbling around you, is truly a gaming epiphany. This is possibly the most exquisitely crafted action game of all time.

*Half-Life 2* is a firstperson shooter. But in action, storytelling, technical achievement, atmosphere and intensity it has far outdone its peers. Valve just hit the top note no other PC game developer could reach. **[10]**

## Walk the Dog



***Half-Life 2*** **mixes AI and scripted sequences to create believable behaviour. Chief among these are the sections involving combat robot Dog. Initially it teaches you about physics and the gravity gun, and later goes on to fight Combine troops in the most spectacular manner. Animation is one of *Half-Life 2*'s most superlative-defying elements, particularly with the human characters. This attention to the nuances of movement manages to imbue Dog with genuinely cute canine charm, despite being a giant cyclopean mech-ape.**

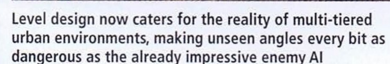


# HALO 2

FORMAT: XBOX PRICE: $99.95 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT
DEVELOPER: BUNGIE



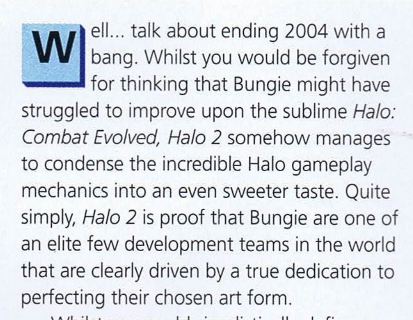




Level design now caters for the reality of multi-tiered urban environments, making unseen angles every bit as dangerous as the already impressive enemy AI

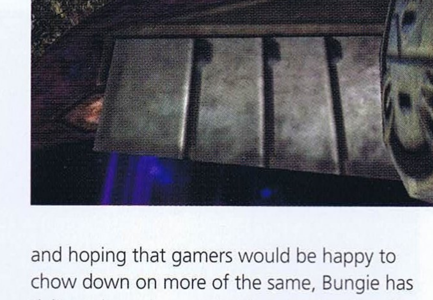






Well... talk about ending 2004 with a bang. Whilst you would be forgiven for thinking that Bungie might have struggled to improve upon the sublime *Halo: Combat Evolved, Halo 2* somehow manages to condense the incredible Halo gameplay mechanics into an even sweeter taste. Quite simply, *Halo 2* is proof that Bungie are one of an elite few development teams in the world that are clearly driven by a true dedication to perfecting their chosen art form.

Whilst you could simplistically define *Halo 2* as *Combat Evolved* on steroids, it wouldn't quite do this game's elegant design justice. This is a sequel that not only sets out to return us to a game world we know and love, but which also carefully annuls most of the original's flaws with vivid sweeping improvements. Level design is now majestic, organic and awesome in scale; there are more vehicles and enhanced driving mechanics; improved physics imbue the gameplay with true liveliness; and the flexible new multiplayer mode is bursting with countless welcome options. Rather than just sitting back and hoping that gamers would be happy to chow down on more of the same, Bungie has delivered another masterpiece to stand on its own. *Halo 2* is faster, louder, pussycat.



Whilst the enigmatic Master Chief continues to cement himself into the videogame hall of fame, it's interesting to see that Bungie hasn't been afraid to take a few risks with the storytelling and turn our perceptions on their head. A potentially controversial switch of protagonist at one point in the game is no doubt designed to unsettle those expecting this to be a sequel that simply regurgitates the same old butt-kicking action hero scenario. This twist gives *Halo 2* a flavour all its own, without diverging too far from the exceptional







Seeing vehicle-jacking in the early video footage of Halo 2 does little to dampen the effect of experiencing it first hand in the game itself. This sort of interactivity is just one of the example of how Bungie's latest opus raises the bar




gameplay found in the original. And hey, who doesn't want to wield the elegant Energy Sword?

One of the crucial elements to any good first person shooter is a consistent pacing of content, from the action and exploration to the way new toys are introduced. *Halo 2* achieves this symmetry of gameplay exceptionally well, and there's never a dull moment or lagging chapter in the overall *Halo 2* experience. In fact, each progressive level somehow manages to up the ante, continually exceeding the expectations set by each preceding set-piece. From the first epic struggle to save the Cairo orbital defense grid over Earth, to the resulting ground warfare on the surface of the planet, Master Chief finds himself going out of the frying pan and into the fire - and don't we just love it.



A far better looking game than the original out of exactly the same hardware. It's doubtful that the Xbox system will see another game as polished

This is a relentless feast of dynamic combat - a spectacle of spiraling Banshees, thundering rockets, and deadly point blank firefights, all set within the ultra-convincing context of *Halo 2's* sci-fi universe. Whether it be surviving the deadly efficient Jackal Snipers in the cramped ruins of the metropolis, to trying to take down a monstrous Covenant machine that dwarfs small buildings, *Halo 2* throws jaw-dropping visuals and engrossing action around like it's child's play. In fact, the giddy action thrills on offer here make the first *Halo* seem like a mere test run.

Master Chief's new abilities, dual-wielding weapons and hijacking vehicles, significantly amp up the gameplay, as does the enhanced squadmate AI. An improved checkpoint system now also takes the sting of frustration out of the game, as save points are numerous and placed after most critical bottlenecks. This system also keeps track of how many times you've failed to progress past certain areas, offering you new checkpoints once you've had to replay certain battles one time too many. The potential drawback to this system is that it's open to exploitation by gamers who might be desperate enough to run as fast as they can to the next checkpoint rather than face up to the difficult action on offer. At least the inspired environments should stop players in their tracks often enough to absorb some of the game's true beauty.

Last but not least, *Halo 2* is an impressive technical achievement, squeezing a far better looking game than the original out of exactly the same hardware. It's doubtful that the Xbox system will see another game as polished. Of course, a successful game isn't just a feature-list of special effects, and Bungie has put just as much effort into the storytelling, voice acting, and the supporting musical score, as every other critical gameplay element. Alongside Rockstar's *GTA: San Andreas*, *Halo 2* is the pinnacle of this generation of gaming entertainment. **[10]**

### Live A Little



***Halo 2's*** **two new multiplayer game modes, Assault and Territories, are destined to make the sequel as much of a success online as it is off. Assault revolves around planting a bomb in your opponent's base, whilst Territories borrows the concept of dominating various hot spots in a level for periods of time. Both are a blast, literally. The new *Halo 2* Live enhancements - proximity voice that allows you to only hear players within your immediate vicinity, and the party lobby where friends can cycle through different game types undisturbed - are inspired features that make *Halo 2* an unbeatable multiplayer experience. Just try to resist it, we bet you can't.**



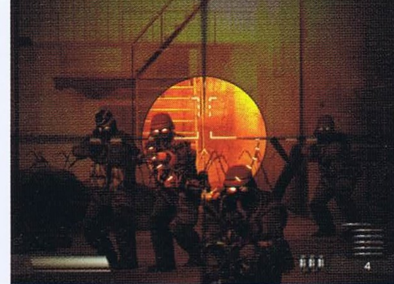


Cited by many gamers as the only thing to fear in the original Halo, the ability to wield the energy sword is a comforting new feature

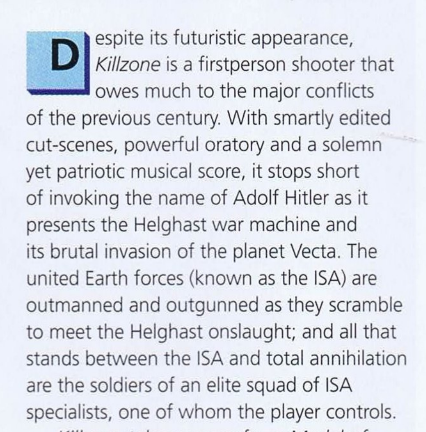






Zooming in with a sniper rifle and watching from a distance will reveal how predictably mechanical the Helghast movements are



Despite its futuristic appearance, *Killzone* is a firstperson shooter that owes much to the major conflicts of the previous century. With smartly edited cut-scenes, powerful oratory and a solemn yet patriotic musical score, it stops short of invoking the name of Adolf Hitler as it presents the Helghast war machine and its brutal invasion of the planet Vecta. The united Earth forces (known as the ISA) are outmanned and outgunned as they scramble to meet the Helghast onslaught; and all that stands between the ISA and total annihilation are the soldiers of an elite squad of ISA specialists, one of whom the player controls.

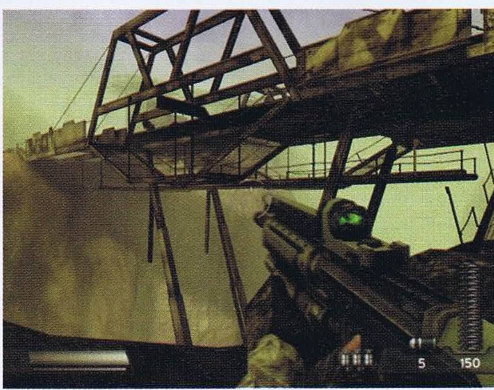
*Killzone* takes a page from *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty* as a simulation of war – driven by atmosphere and defined by tactical set pieces. Every level is an assault on the senses as tracer fire whizzes by, artillery sends debris rippling into the air and the marauding Helghast forces – with their piercing red goggles – continue to swarm through demolished buildings, all while commands, battle cries and screams of pain can be heard on the battlefield from both sides. Player empathy is built through steadily paced narrative, all but force-feeding players with a familiar horrifying message about war and its evils.

This is a great artistic achievement from the developers at Guerrilla, who are no strangers to the war genre after coding *Shellshock*. A robust game engine renders such vivid movement and animations that lend an unnerving edge to *Killzone's* saturated environments, suspending, for the most part, disbelief.

Compared to other first-person shooters, *Killzone* is a visceral, almost tactile experience. Like *The Chronicles of Riddick*, player movement is weighted against each







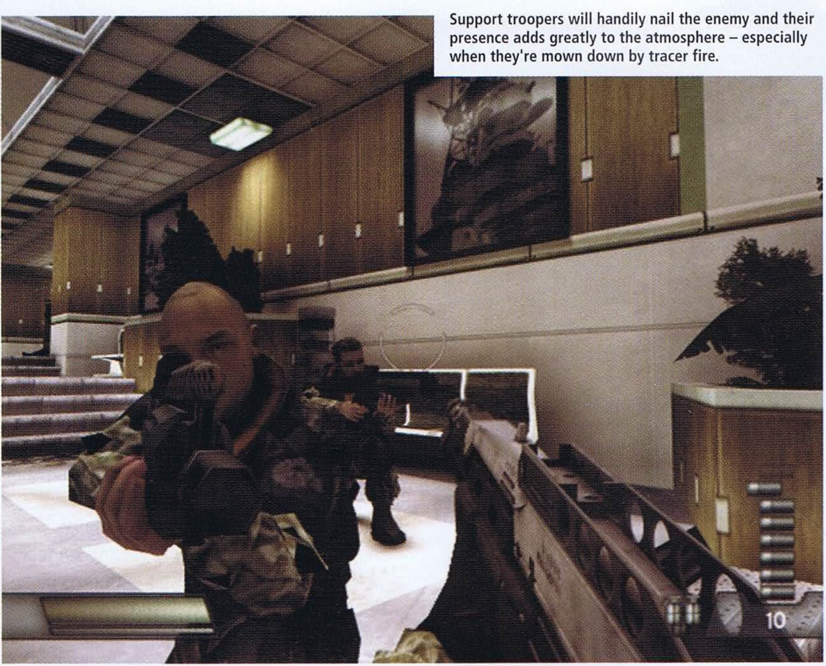
Levels are broad and intricately designed, but it's spoilt somewhat by the background pop-up and lack of interactivity







Once close enough, a context-sensitive icon will inform players of the option to perform an instant-kill melee attack. It's a handy move to use in tight situations, but leaves little to the imagination.



Support troopers will handily nail the enemy and their presence adds greatly to the atmosphere – especially when they're mown down by tracer fire.

stride of one's legs, which grounds one's sense of space and dimension. The in-game physics are suitably realistic – bodies and rubble are thrown by the blast of nearby detonations, rag-doll physics are constantly in play and grenades will arc so gracefully that it invites some measure of experimentation.

Sadly, *Killzone's* atmosphere falters under such scrutiny. Dead bodies fail to react to further abuse, barely a recoil can be found in the weapons fire and the five lines of pre-recorded dialogue that repeats for the twentieth time in one level really starts to grate. For most players, the illusion of a believable virtual world will happily accommodate these shortcomings, not to mention the standard screen furniture



## Rag-doll physics are constantly in play and grenades arc so gracefully that it invites some measure of experimentation

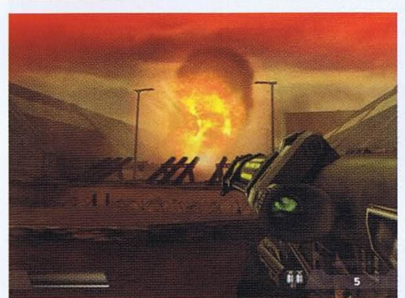
like energy and ammo bars. It won't accommodate artificial barriers, though, nor the inability to jump. They are an absolute annoyance, particularly the impassable four inch-high roadside kerbs that prevent players from venturing beyond a level's predetermined boundaries. Occasionally, players will be prompted by a context-sensitive icon to leap over fences and other small barriers, but they do little to hide the inherently linear passage of each scenario as players are directed from one predictable level trigger to the next.

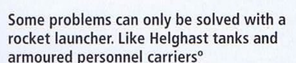
The trade-off for this lack of freedom is a successive line of cleverly designed set pieces. Each section exploits the use of different weapons, troop numbers, buildings and obstacle placements. Whether prompted by NPCs or otherwise, players are always encouraged to seek cover, higher ground or flanking positions; and the Helghast invaders will react appropriately to suppressing and cover fire. That doesn't mean they're entirely intelligent, though – most of them behave as scripted and they're fodder against players who are smart and courageous enough to pursue any tactical opportunities. This is obviously less of a concern when played with up to 11 other free-thinking people through the PlayStation 2's online adapter, but *Killzone* remains predominantly a single-player driven game.

*Killzone* is a rare achievement for the PlayStation 2, rare because quality first-person shooters are usually found on other formats. However, any discussion of what it accomplishes only draws attention to its substantial shortcomings, particularly when compared against recent industry benchmarks like *Half-Life 2* and *Halo 2*. Inexplicable and arbitrary 'game' rules are serious detractors to the experience, as are the consistently sudden drops in frame rate during the game's key 'moments' that ruin the atmosphere; and one cannot escape the feeling that it is more like a skilful patchwork of scenarios and features than the masterpiece it hopes to be. **[6]**

### Multiple personas

Happily, player interest and replay value are sustained through *Killzone's* four playable characters. Players initially start with Templar, a typically All-American hero style of protagonist with a well balanced skill set. The other characters call for slightly different styles of play such as sneaking stealthily between the shadows or laying waste to entire platoons in the blink of an eye. It's a grimly satisfying contrast to the initial experience with Templar, though the difference it ultimately makes to gameplay are only subtle.





Some problems can only be solved with a rocket launcher. Like Helghast tanks and armoured personnel carriers°



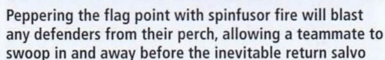


# TRIBES: VENGEANCE

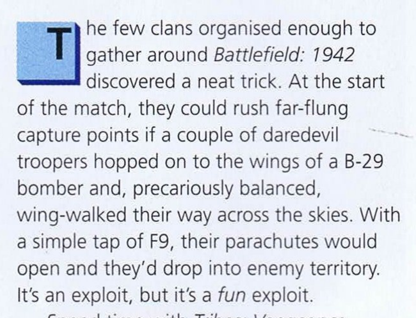
FORMAT: PC PRICE: $89.95 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: VIVENDI
DEVELOPER: IRRATIONAL GAMES





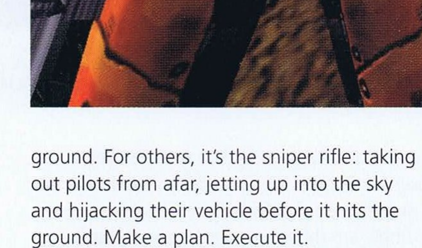


Peppering the flag point with spinfusor fire will blast any defenders from their perch, allowing a teammate to swoop in and away before the inevitable return salvo



The few clans organised enough to gather around *Battlefield: 1942* discovered a neat trick. At the start of the match, they could rush far-flung capture points if a couple of daredevil troopers hopped on to the wings of a B-29 bomber and, precariously balanced, wing-walked their way across the skies. With a simple tap of F9, their parachutes would open and they'd drop into enemy territory. It's an exploit, but it's a *fun* exploit.

Spend time with *Tribes: Vengeance* and you come away with much the same feeling. The game is imbued with possibility. The toolset might be small but the options, and the chances for players to go from quite skilled to online ninja, are enormous. While there's obvious pleasure in learning the perfect mortar arc, the inclusion of a grappling hook fills the mind with options. Fire it out at any point and it will immediately latch on to any surface. There are no special cases, so you can catch a lift with a passing bomber, dangling from its behind, or just use it to drag an enemy flag runner to the ground. For others, it's the sniper rifle: taking out pilots from afar, jetting up into the sky and hijacking their vehicle before it hits the ground. Make a plan. Execute it.



Sitting somewhere between *Quake 3* and *Thrust*, *Tribes* is a real oddity. It's essentially two games split in half; an excellent online multiplayer option and an extended singleplayer storyline that veers wildly from mediocre to outstanding in the space of a couple of levels. The opening sections are dire – a series of scripted run-and-gun corridor missions set in a burning ship, they're claustrophobic, slow, cumbersome and the very antithesis of the previous *Tribes* games. Out of doors, it gets better; there's a marvellous sensation of space as you realise





Like the Covenant's sword, the energy blade is devastating up close. Its use in multiplayer needs skill, as opponents can jet away at any moment







This tribal warrior acts as your escort for the first outdoor mission. He's well-armed and intelligent, clearing a path through the local penguin-like wildlife for your sadly underpowered character, but he never says a word

Steering medical supplies through an abandoned city is one of the set tasks. You steer, while an AI partner sends up a barrage of flak, bringing down attackers

that these firstperson battles are to be fought in three dimensions. You can fly. And so can the AI. You jockey for position, firing your jets in short bursts, predicting where your opponent will be, holding off on firing until you're certain, absolutely certain, that your shells will connect.

It comes down to tactile response. The game encourages you to feel your way across the landscape, using the jetpacks to climb the peaks, then 'skiing' down the other side, throwing up a dust wake. Skiing was an exploit in the original *Tribes*, but has been elevated to fundamental game mechanic. Experienced players will see the potential inherent in geography: downslopes used to build momentum for the upward climb, using the fringe to launch up, up and away.



**Outside, raining bubblegum-blue death from above like Icarus in iron trousers, all that's important is that feeling: of height, of speed and of possibility**

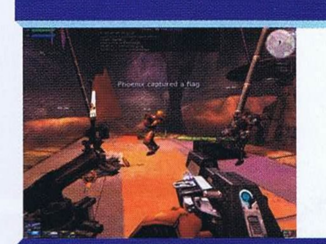
And, as your experience with the tools grows, so do your options. The most intriguing singleplayer missions are set up as playgrounds, four or more objectives within a couple of square kilometres of open terrain and a free reign on what you tackle, when, and how. One infiltration mission sees you inserting a computer virus into three specific enemy subsystems: the radar, fixed gun emplacements and recharge points. Coopt each in turn, and their benefits are immediately transferred to you. Make another plan. Execute it.

The open levels are complemented by a wonderfully written, absolutely charming storyline. Every scenario is played from a different character's perspective, each highlighting their motivations and place within the wider universe. A bored, naïve princess; a lonely tribal leader; his lieutenant; a nine-year-old girl or a droid assassin. The dialogue is immediately engaging, the characters balanced and weirdly believable. And, while there's little of that gradual dawning that videogames do so well, story told through geography, the very fact you're playing these characters makes you feel for their fate.

And yet it can occasionally feel slightly primitive. The spinfusor disk is incorrectly sighted, for instance, just a little off in the Y-axis. Distracting. The ground-based vehicles, a buggy and a jet-propelled tank, don't carry the same sense of momentum as the rest of the game – there's almost too much friction between them and the ground. Take your finger off the forward key and they'll judder to a stop, rooted to the ground. Aggravating. Again, it needs to be said: the indoor missions are a letdown – ceilings simply get in the way. Disappointing.

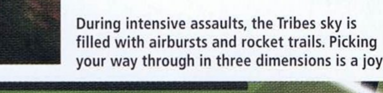
But, out of doors, raining bubblegum-blue death from above like Icarus in iron trousers, none of that matters. All that's important is that feeling: of height, of speed and of possibility. **[7]**

## Extending the universe



**The embedded multiplayer is traditional; there's none of the capture-and-hold mechanic made fashionable by *BF:1942* or *UT2004*. Capture The Flag is wildly popular, yet the Fuel (rob resources from stationary refuelling dumps) and Ball (score goals by throwing a ball through your opponents goal) are gaining ground. That's likely to change – Irrational is promising extensive mod support, to the extent that commercially sanctioned mod projects already exist. *Starsiege: 2945* aims to add the Hercs (massive mechanical walkers) of previous games in the series, alongside the traditional vehicles and infantry. The *Tribes* community has remained wildly faithful since the original game's release back in 1999: if they adopt this, expect a barrage of further mods and total conversions.**





During intensive assaults, the Tribes sky is filled with airbursts and rocket trails. Picking your way through in three dimensions is a joy









## JAK 3

**FORMAT:** PS2 **PRICE:** $99.95 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
**PUBLISHER:** SCEA
**DEVELOPER:** NAUGHTY DOG

An unashamedly ambitious venture from its inception, the *Jak & Daxter* trilogy set out to redefine what is and isn't possible in a videogame. Intricate characters, sprawling levels, a strong story hidden behind a veil of non-linearity… these were high goals indeed, ones that the greatest game designers of the 128-bit console era have set their sights on. How big can a game get, before it becomes overwhelming? Or before the player ceases to care?

To this end, Jak's continuing adventures have certainly blazed the trail ahead, by making some truly frustrating design mistakes. The greatest achievement of the series has been creating the illusion of no loading times. Levels are enormous, crammed full of life and detail, and separated by huge, clunking, slowly-opening doors. It's obvious that memory is being juggled behind the scenes, but as illusions go, it's an agreeable one.

Disagreeable features are also in abundance. Most grating is an affected sense of coolness, of attitude cut by the yard, but poorly tailored all the same. Underneath the veneer of story and character is the species of fuzzy animal platform gaming star we've known for a generation – anthropomorphic, usually only clad in trousers. While fully clothed, Jak balances this rule by hosting a naked little runt on his shoulder, the rambling, Brooklyn-accented Daxter. There's the occasional bad-ass line from the hero, alternating with exposition and insult in equal parts from the sidekick. It's a valid storytelling technique, but it still grates. Greatest of these blunders was the gigantism suffered by the hub area of *Jak 2: Renegade*, a monstrous torture chamber of a metropolis overflowing with hostile guards.

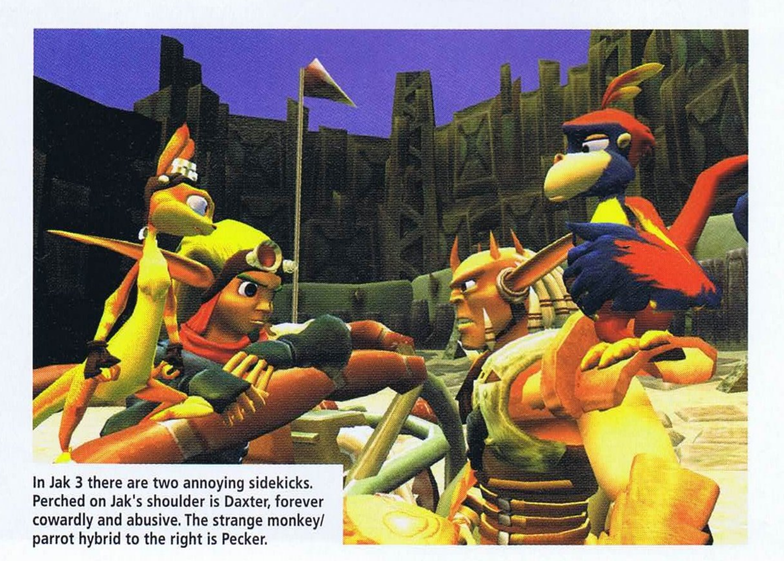


**This angelic new form offers more special attacks for our pointy-eared chum, available in limited bursts only**

Returning from the dystopian cyberpunk middle chapter is the wide range of firearms. They're over-designed and ugly, like most of the hardware at Jak's disposal, but at least they're useful. With exotic names and colour schemes they perform the same functions of remote death-dealing in most run-and-gun shooters, with the added novelty of glowing ammunition and some nice screen distortion effects when they discharge.

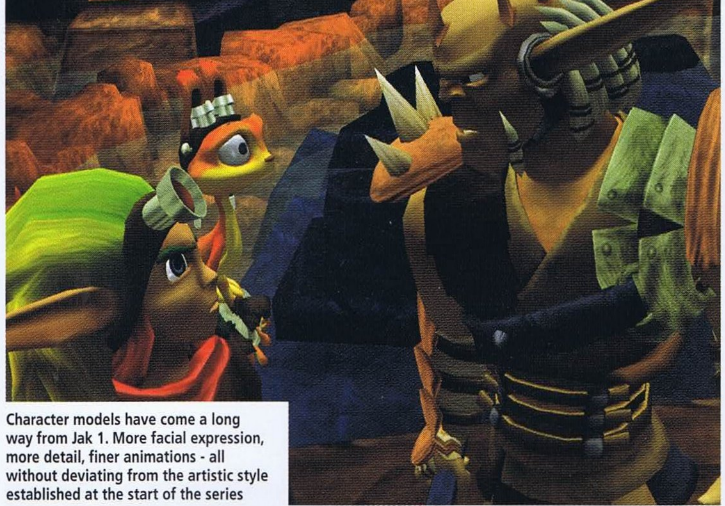
The story this time round has taken a turn for the post-apocalyptic. Having saved Haven City, Jak's reward is exile in the vast tracts of surrounding wasteland. As delightful as it is to see the goatee-wearing hipster and his obnoxious little chum cast out, he's soon back on his feet, managing quests and weapon upgrades from a more manageable base of operations, the oasis town of Spargus.

Marinated in Mad Max flavouring, the new cast even has a passably realistic Australian character. The mission-dispensing, race-organising Kleiver strines a blue streak, rattling off expressions that never would

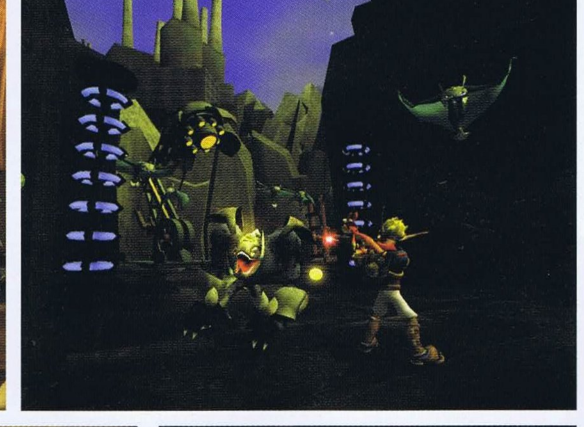


**In Jak 3 there are two annoying sidekicks. Perched on Jak's shoulder is Daxter, forever cowardly and abusive. The strange monkey/parrot hybrid to the right is Pecker.**





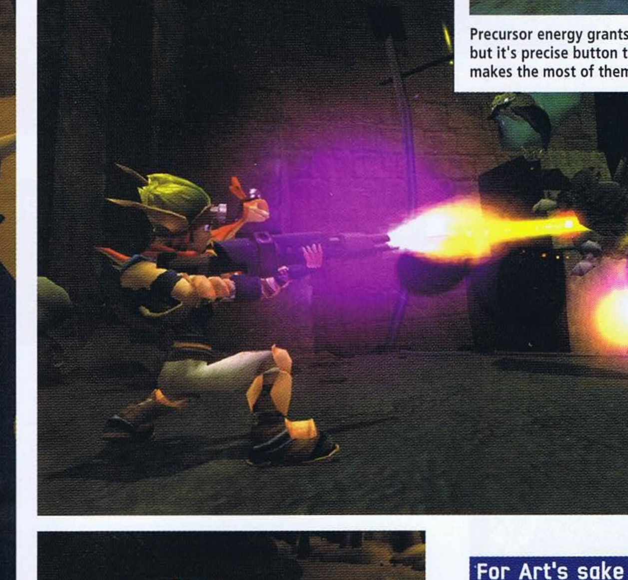
Character models have come a long way from Jak 1. More facial expression, more detail, finer animations - all without deviating from the artistic style established at the start of the series





Precursor energy grants Jak his powers, but it's precise button tapping that makes the most of them







Jak be nimble, Jak be quick, Jak must complete repetitive, precise tasks lest his health be knocked down to zero. Jak also has unlimited lives; a handy feature in a hostile world

have made it into the pseudo-antipodean *Crash*. There's also a hint of Dune in the mix, with a cast of female monks blatantly reminiscent of the Bene Gesserit Sisterhood. They've certainly got the mumbo-jumbo angle tied up, prattling on about Jak's destiny from behind absurd face paint.

Central to Jak's world is the ever-presence of death. Deaths of countless, identical enemies, but chiefly the endlessly recurring



There's also a hint of Dune in the mix, with a cast of female monks blatantly reminiscent of the Bene Gesserit Sisterood.

deaths of Jak himself. There are no lives to horde and obsess over, instead finicky, fatal challenges to overcome through unlimited spats of trial and error. To get an idea of how all this manifests, one need only picture the very first challenge in the game: a series of jumping puzzles over a lava pit. One false move, and the furry avatar plummets into boiling, flesh rending molten rock. From there the fatal games continue, with obsession over fine motor control the desired outcome every time.

Thus when the plot boldly reveals that Jak is doomed to die, the player isn't terribly moved. The Dark Eco that charges up his fleeting super-powered attack mode may well be toxic, and the artifacts of the awkwardly named Precursor civilisation may well be abominations, but that won't stop Jak tooling off across the boundless sandy wastes in search of checkpoints and keys. Balancing the dune buggy action and gunplay are the optional, mindless challenges of mini-games, plus the de rigeur imperative to collect crystals.

Cast into the deep desert, *Jak 3* thus presents itself as an unwitting allegory for the field of contemporary game design. The high goals of the franchise are only partially met as the trilogy closes, with most of the effort of the creators having gone into correcting past mistakes. Dialogue is terse and functional, some interesting visual storytelling techniques come into play, and while the trappings of a lived-in universe seldom convince, they get in the way just as often. The camera has its quirks, but we've seen much worse. The blockbuster look and feel is there, but even in this bleached desert world it's hard to tell what's an integral part of the game, and what's just for show.

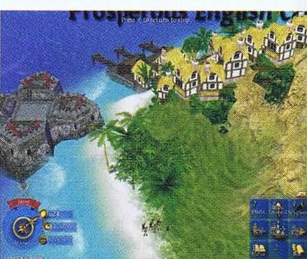
It's better than *Jak 2*, more colourful, and much, much larger. Now is probably the best time to explore this franchise, before like Ozymandias, Jak's legacy is swallowed by the shifting sands. **[7]**

## For Art's sake



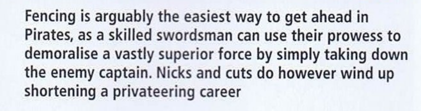
**In devising the modern-yet-ancient world of the desert Jak explores, the designers at Naughty Dog drew from numerous influences. There's the post-apocalyptic Mad Max, the ancient secrets of Dune, and here we can see the kind of face-painting enjoyed by children at the Easter Shows and other carnivals everywhere. In seriousness though, masks and face painting aren't exactly new features in gaming. Just check out this month's 'Time Extend' article for an example.**



As if sailing due East wasn't slow enough, sometimes buried treasure or inland towns will wind up coercing the player into hoofing it for a while - a very minor part of the game





Fencing is arguably the easiest way to get ahead in Pirates, as a skilled swordsman can use their prowess to demoralise a vastly superior force by simply taking down the enemy captain. Nicks and cuts do however wind up shortening a privateering career



# SID MEIER'S PIRATES!

FORMAT: PC PUBLISHER: ATARI DEVELOPER: FIRAXIS
PRICE: $89.95 RELEASE: NOVEMBER
PREVIOUSLY IN: E2



There are countless annoying captains of the guard around the Spanish Main that like to insult barmaids, whom generally wind up having the last laugh

Back in the Commodore 64's heyday, *Sid Meier's Pirates* was an extremely popular game, and when considering the game's features, it's no surprise. Sid had created a non-linear adventure game, long before even the most discerning game critics were even thinking about linear or non-linear gaming. All people knew that they could go where they wanted, work for whomever they chose and do whatever they pleased, and they liked it.

In this 2004 remake, Firaxis have left the core of this seventeen year old classic intact, simply working in some extra depth and interactivity into the old tropical mix of fencing, naval combat, courtship, skullduggery and plunder. *Pirates* is essentially a collection of mini-games that come together to form one cohesive adventure that forgoes a solid storyline for an open-ended format, where the player decides what their goal is each time they play.

This freedom of choice starts even before the adventure does, as the player chooses a pirating forte: fencing, navigation, medicine, gunnery or wit and charm. From there, they can seek love, fame, fortune, revenge or all of the above.

The European powers of Spain, England, France and Holland have settlements all over the Caribbean, giving the player four major factions to work for, and of course, against. Added to the mix in this modern remake are pirate havens, Indian villages and Jesuit missions, that join the ecosystem to ensure the virtual 17th century Spanish Main feels like a living breathing world that the player can have a tangible effect upon. Coerce Indians into attacking a nearby town, tell the Jesuits to direct immigrants into a certain town, intercept a peace treaty or raid a settlement and install a new Governor. These are just a few of the ways the player can pull the strings and affect everything from the economy through to the balance of power in the region.

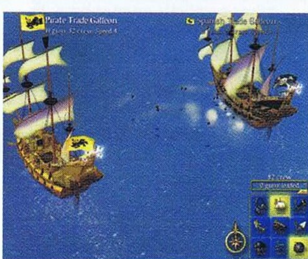
In practical gaming terms this boils down to navigating from one to settlement to the next, capturing everything from small agile sloops to hulking war galleons along the way. Naval battles are very much arcade-like, but still offer a tactical challenge, while the fencing duels play out as an overly simplistic timing challenge that most veteran gamers will find too easy.

*Pirates'* true challenge lies in time management, as the player only has so many years they can expect to terrorise the seas, even if they master the art of maintaining a large powerful fleet, crewed by a powerful pirate army. Ruthless captains will choose a terrible battle to finish a 'voyage' to split plunder with fewer pairs of hands.

A host of items and upgrades augment the player's abilities in the action sequences, right down to slippers for lighter feet on the dancefloor for rogues plying their charms on a Governor's daughter. Manage that and the femme in question will usually part with information or one of the aforementioned items. In *Pirates*, it pays to be a shameless womaniser, even once married.

Brought to life with modern-day audio-visual panache, *Pirates* is still a classic that oozes simple charm. Like Caribbean waters, Meier's remake may appear shallow, but it offers enough to see and do to encourage more than one revisit. **[8]**

## Naval nuances



**It may be simplistic, with the options being limited to full sails, reef sails, turn and fire, but naval combat in Pirates is very much a realtime tactical mini-game. With winds commonly making sailing East a deadly slow activity, everything from figuring which side to approach the battle from, right through to what ship in the player's fleet will offer them the best balance of firepower, manoeuvrability and troops for the upcoming battle can make all the difference. So in essense, even though larger vessels and crews tend to triumph, David sometimes gives Goliath what for.**

The age old phenomena where by women fancy men that can dance has been worked into the modern remake, offering a mini-game to win over Governors' daughters



# PAPER MARIO 2: THE THOUSAND YEAR DOOR

FORMAT: GAMECUBE PRICE: $99.95 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS

Australian Nintendo and/or RPG enthusiasts may have missed the first *Paper Mario* as the game saw a very limited number of copies hitting the shelves. Equally the first Mario RPG, *Super Mario RPG*, developed by Squaresoft for the SNES never saw the light of day on Australian shores. However, these barriers should not defer interest in this game as *Paper Mario* is one of the better releases from the company for GameCube in some time and proves to be an enjoyable romp through a tongue-in-cheek Nintendo-centric world.

*Paper Mario 2* carries the 'paper' theme to the nines and delivers a wonderfully paced and beautifully presented adventure. Moving Mario about the map is keen on the eyes and enjoyable in stimulation. Flipping him too and fro equally sells the paper idea, but it's not until the gameplay and puzzle system begin to drive the paper aspect of *Paper Mario 2* that we see the fruits of Intelligent System's labour. At later points in the game activating switches to peel paper from walls revealing a doorway, or even folding Mario into a paper aeroplane are stock standard gameplay elements.

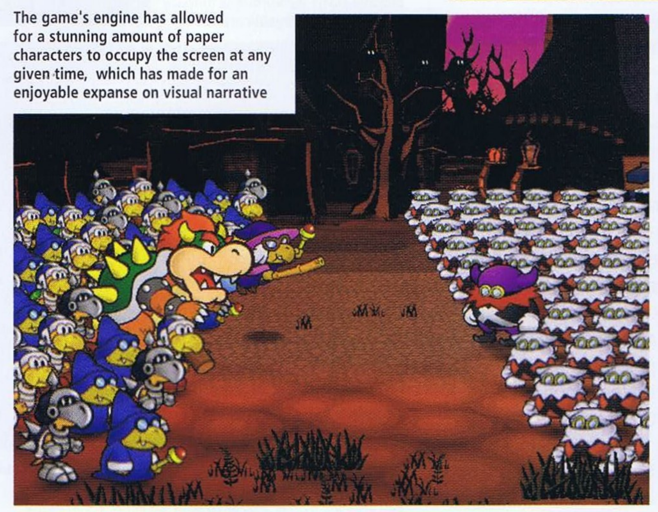
While an RPG by nature, *Paper Mario 2* serves a delicious and eclectic range of innovative ideas with a turn-based battle system that incorporates real-time interaction to either inflict more damage, raise attack and defence statistics or protect yourself. A new addition to the battle system for the series sees Mario and co. fighting in front of a crowd on a stage. This means you have to get the crowd on side and the better you perform for your onlookers the more rewards you'll get. Moreover, performing poorly will have disastrous repercussions as your crowd numbers will decrease and the ability to perform certain moves is void.

Carrying on the RPG theme, *Paper Mario 2* employs a very deep text system with a lot of wonderful scripting and much to read. You can learn information about every character you meet, every place you visit and every enemy you face. However, it's not imperative and as such the usual annoyance of being forced to read unnecessary text is removed leaving the decision in the hands of the player.

*Paper Mario 2* is a bright, colourful game that pokes fun at itself and Nintendo as a business, the battle system is engaging and far more interesting than most offered by other titles that form the genre - ironic considering these games all take themselves far more seriously, and should in turn be introducing such features. This ends up making *Paper Mario 2* one of the more accessible and refreshing 'alternate' RPGs of this year, rather than just another means of milking more from Nintendo's more endearing characters. **[9]**



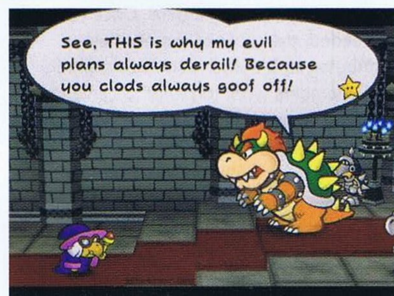
The 'Paper' theme comes across brilliantly in game design as a number of puzzles and visual developments rely solely on the ability to exploit the game's world theme - look out for pop up bridges, walls peeling, etc...



The game's engine has allowed for a stunning amount of paper characters to occupy the screen at any given time, which has made for an enjoyable expanse on visual narrative

The idea of 'performing' in front of an audience is certainly unique and the execution of this concept comes across very well. Players are encouraged to perform as consistently as possible to attract more audience members. If you're lucky you may even see Mario's brother!








Nintendo's penchant for unique and creative art-direction in their first-party titles is well and truly in force with Paper Mario. The game's theme then becomes a creative tool for Intelligent Systems who have obviously let their imaginations run wild with Paper Mario 2. Kudos to Nintendo for allowing such fervent expression

## Old School




**There is a portion of the game where you play as Mario's number one rival, the notorious Bowser. However, the unique thing about this is it's a romp through a recreation of World 1-1 from the NES classic Super Mario Bros. It's decidedly chic and extremely funny with Nintendo in-jokes all over. Beware non-Nintendo fans, *Paper Mario 2* is yet another game that delivers fully to the hardcore fan-base.**



# MONSTER HUNTER

FORMAT: PS2 PUBLISHER: CAPCOM DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
PRICE: US$50 (£40)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), APRIL 2005 (AU)

## Making online PALs



**Having taken a drubbing over *Resident Evil: Outbreak*'s offline status for PAL players, Capcom is taking no chances with *Monster Hunter* and has recently embarked on a 5,000-player online beta test of the game in PAL territories. Since the purpose of the test is to identify any technical problems in the system, it's not currently willing to make any guarantees, but it's a good indication of its determination to bring the full online *Monster Hunter* experience to PAL markets next year. Aware that the offline section game isn't a realistic commercial prospect, Capcom is willing to delay the release if it's necessary to iron out the online aspect.**

Given a cursory glance, it seems easy to pigeonhole *Monster Hunter* as a 'me-too' online RPG – connect to a hub world and find three fellow hunters with whom to quest – but this is a game that swiftly sets itself apart. If there's one lesson it sets out to teach, it's that no man can stand alone. The game 's major achievement is an emphasis less on personal advancement, but rather on working as a cohesive unit to achieve your collective goal – the hunting of monsters, truly absurdly monstrous monsters.

Structurally, the game reinforces this message. Experience points are not awarded on a per-kill basis, but rather upon successful completion of a quest. This means no single person can hoard the glory and that all hunters have a vested interest in seeing their teammates succeed, since each death cuts the mission bounty by a third. Once you've succeeded, the spoils of the hunt aren't distributed by a mad scramble or arbitrary die toss: members work together to carve up the physical remains of the beasts into bones, scales, hides, and claws. These, along with ores mined in the levels and other post-quest rewards, can be used in town to create and upgrade weapons and armour as far as your Hunter Rank will allow.




Though maps are split into compartmentalised 'rooms', the gameworld is gorgeously rendered and lushly populated, with photorealistic backgrounds that are as alive as the playable areas




Monsters move about the map at all times, going about their daily business, and have a specific range of vision. Should you stumble across one, keep your distance, creep in the brush, and you might make it out without being spotted



A dizzying line-up of equipment upgrades and options awaits you, but you may want to consult a guide before making any big purchases. Truly humiliating and unheroic combinations lie within




As but one example of the game's copious comic relief, once spotted by a monster (as indicated by the half-serpent eye next to your name), the running animation changes from relaxed trot to flailing, panicked, all-knees-and-elbows sprint

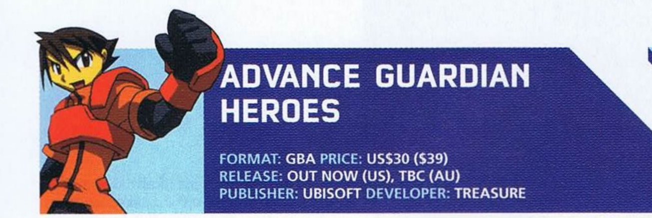
Attacks are unleashed solely by the right analogue stick, various directions applying to different swings in the case of blademasters, or with a click to fire and holding back to reload for gunners. This approach initially feels staggering and awkward as you flail one over-extended swing at a time, but eventually gives way to the discovery of near-limitless combos delivering a steady relentless attack. With no lock-on for your targets, the camera can at first be a hindrance at the worst of all possible moments, but learning to compensate with the D-pad or L1 to refocus your attack is an art that comes with experience.

Capcom's decision not to include voice chat does means that heat-of-battle communications beyond 'RUN!' are quite limited. A click of the left analogue stick will send an SOS beacon alerting your crew that you require immediate attention, but otherwise this limitation requires nearly all of the tactical planning to be carried out before beginning the quest. Skimp on this planning and a quest can be over in seconds, but get it right and you'll choreograph a protracted battle, luring your quarry into traps, dropping explosives – your party's swordsmen swinging wildly at the front and gunners firing from the rear. Plus inevitably having to give chase to the wounded creature as it flees halfway across the map.




The game's singleplayer mode is little more than tutorial and sideshow diversion for your online persona – fair warning to those without broadband access, but there's some real challenges to be had, like plucking a wyvern's egg from her nest while she sleeps just metres away

*Monster Hunter* is at its best when lurching you from confident domineering into sudden vulnerability with little more than the beating of approaching wings and a shadow looming overhead. It's an excellent exercise in humility and cooperation, and one that should not be passed by. **[8]**



# ADVANCE GUARDIAN HEROES

FORMAT: GBA PRICE: US$30 ($39)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBC (AU)
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: TREASURE

A little slowdown can go a long way, teasing out a boss explosion into a gratuitous money shot or increasing the player's chances of survival when the on-screen odds are so troublesome that even the processor is having trouble keeping up. And Treasure's designers as much as anyone else have taught us this.

But with *Advance Guardian Heroes* it's something that's been indulged in a little too liberally. Slowdown in this scrolling beat 'em up is copious, but not necessarily ruinous; it doesn't break the game – thanks to the counterattack system being so relaxed and accessible, fittingly so for the GBA – but the stuttering pace of the action does mean that you'll often feel like you're playing a poorly emulated piece of software that was conceived to run on something a bit more powerful.

Otherwise, outside of the awful dialogue localisation, things are solid. A decent combat system has been mapped on to the GBA's four buttons, cramming in combos, magic flurries and satisfying counters. While it doesn't pass as an update or a worthy torch bearer for the hyperactive, all-out action-clash that was the original *Guardian Heroes*, the resemblance is still there. It's more homage than successor, but it's a decent beat 'em up in its own right.

Some swish graphical tricks have been employed – notably, the second level's white-water rafting trip into the screen – possibly explaining away some of that prevalent slowdown that occurs even when things get even medium-busy.



Every time you die, you're given a choice: retry from the most recent restart point, or continue alive and invincible for a short period in return for your 'soul'. It's a function that allows you to continue on and study boss patterns, so that you're more clued-up the next time you play

It is, however, a little short. A register of unlockable characters and modes helps lessen the feeling of limitation somewhat, but it's a far cry from the 30-level-strong, carve-your-own-adventure setting of the Sega Saturn original.

Perhaps a more fitting title for the game would be *Retreat Guardian Heroes*, for all its steps backward when inevitably measured up against the mould-breaking original. Ignoring any weight of expectation, it remains a likeable fighting game thanks mostly to that simple, tactile countering system, but its brevity and abundant slowdown mean it's still not anywhere near as magnificent as the more-apt comparison that is Treasure's GBA Astro Boy title. **[6]**



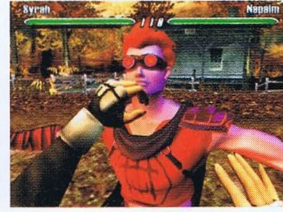
By donating collected crystals to the laboratory, or finishing the unlockable Time Attack mode over and over, more than 20 characters become available to unlock. An arena-based rumble for up to four players is also featured

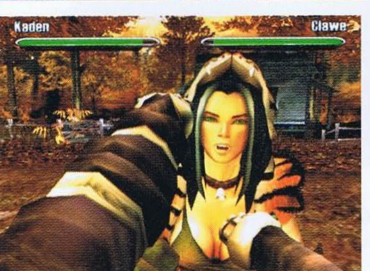


# GAMETRAK: DARK WIND

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: £70 ($170) INCLUDING GAMETRAK
RELEASE: OUT NOW (UK) PUBLISHER: IN2GAMES
DEVELOPER: ATOMIC PLANET







As you hit your opponent you build up their red rage meter. Once full, they'll unleash a flurry of attacks which leave you time only to block. Players can gain more special attacks by crossing their arms in amusing, showy martial arts poses

Gametrak's inventors are determined that the device isn't a peripheral, it's a platform. When it's plugged into a PS2 (a PC version is planned), they claim it changes the console so dramatically that it becomes a new hybrid device for which none of the existing catalogue of games is suitable. Only Gametrak games will be playable with the Gametrak controller, which means that nothing else you've got on your shelves, and nothing else the shops have on their shelves, will recognise it. Until more Gametrak games become available (a golf title and a party game collection are planned), all you'll be playing is *Dark Wind*.

It has to be this way. Gametrak does a robust and precise job of converting your 3D movements into on-screen actions. Its makers claim an accuracy of up to a millimetre in a three-metre square, and although it doesn't feel like that as you flail and fudge your way through the first few fights, you're willing to chalk that up to your own learning curve rather than technical failings. The shock of moving your fist and seeing it connect with someone's face on screen is profound, and rather strangely delicious. Before long, you start to take the device so much for granted that you can't understand why your fingers don't animate on screen when you wiggle them. There's no question that Gametrak passes the thumping test with full honours.

What you'll be thumping is a fairly brief roster of typically unconventional characters. You can throw jabs, hooks and belly punches, taking advantage of the range of movement offered by the hardware. To dodge you'll need to follow prompts on the screen, covering the quadrant where the next blow is coming from. It feels a little crude, but it does break up the pace of the fights. Successfully blocking builds up your special attack meter and you'll need to strike poses – *Samba De Amigo* style – to unleash them. It adds some technical depth to what is otherwise a very simple and only adequately presented game. Gametrak needed *Dark Wind* to do two things: to prove that it worked and to show it wasn't just a novelty. It's delivered, but only on the first aspect. **[5]**




Special attacks can cause you to jump backwards, a movement Gametrak doesn't currently support



# BLOOD WILL TELL: OSAMU TEZUKA'S DORORO

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: US$40 ($52) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBC (AU)
PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (PREVIOUSLY SEGA WOW)/RED ENT

It's not intended as a criticism, but Wow was never one of Sega's more adventurous studios – making it all the more surprising that it would be tasked with producing a game from Tezuka's bizarre skew on the wandering samurai tale. Perhaps spurred on by Red's characteristically spectacular design flourishes or the sheer strength of that story, *Blood Will Tell* is a game that, in its determination to break the mould of Wow's past efforts, breaks itself.

*Blood Will Tell* is at its most successful with the simplistic on-rails action many expected, but it's also a point-and-slash adventure, a feudal *Metroid*, and (most unsuccessfully) a platformer, each element jostling for attention in a framework too simple to really support anything but that first one-track dynamic. And while the tale is timeless, the engine is already dated, forced to present scenes that long for widescreen majesty on a made-for-television budget.

The wonder isn't that it works at all, but that at its best moments it can work so well, with countless subtle nuances – the rhythmic drumming of bare feet across wooden floorboards, the convulsive recoil of a stricken demon – infusing the game with a sense of completeness even when it's so obviously threadbare with loose ends.

Most impressive is the sense of patchwork ronin Hyakkimaru's transformation from prosthetics to flesh-and-blood as each of his stolen body parts is reclaimed. Combat, initially as artificial as his sword-limbs, steadily develops through the course of the game until downing a hundred enemies in sequence becomes an instinctive dance of slides, backflips and flashing blades.

In contrast, his companion Dororo is underdeveloped: Dororo's solo sections never play up to his thiefly character, instead being a clumsy reworking of Hyakkimaru's game that makes combat a stilted chore and platforming far worse. When tagging along with Hyakkimaru in the main game, he's an almost insignificant presence – appreciating this, the game wisely doesn't require you to protect him (a fact you'll be thankful for in the boss fights, which usually prove too taxing for his rudimentary AI).

It's a sore point not just because of the limp mechanics, but because Dororo is immensely likeable, proving untrue the gaming adage of never working with sidekicks or children. The interplay between the two leads, both intended and imagined, provides a simple humanity leagues more engaging than the vacuous cool of other action titles, and that may provide reason enough to follow their journey to its bittersweet conclusion.

There are scores of tiny, surprising, memorable reasons to like *Blood Will Tell*, and one big reason not to: the game can't do them all justice. It's as likely to aggravate as to amaze, and even if you appreciate its peculiar magic there are sections where that magic is stretched so thin it's impossible not to fall out of its spell. This is a game both hugely worthy and hugely flawed, and neither can quite outweigh the other. **[6]**





Hyakkimaru's arm-blades gain in strength through constant use, in contrast to his swords, which have fixed levels and powers as they are collected throughout the game. Higher levels for both weapon types allow lengthier combo attacks



Though the quality of the localised script and dialogue is occasionally shaky, the story scenes still benefit from excellent direction, sharing the game's eye for emotional detail





A second player can assume control of Dororo in sections where both characters are present, but it's as undernourished as Ico's twoplayer. Left wanting for design attention, he's simply not as compelling to play as Hyakkimaru

## Who's the boss?



Each of the 48 fiends holding claim to Hyakkimaru's anatomy puts up a unique boss fight, with only a handful being palette-swapped versions of previous encounters. For all the creature design talent on display, there's a general lack of challenge – but the highlights are no less memorable for it, and the ultimate, 48th fiend (which players are unlikely to challenge on their first play, as all its brethren must first be located and defeated) provides a suitably marathon battle.



# THE GETAWAY: BLACK MONDAY

**FORMAT:** PS2 **PUBLISHER:** SCEA **DEVELOPER:** TEAM SOHO
**PRICE:** $99.95 **RELEASE:** NOW

Sprawling, mission-focused, urban automotive crime action games have come a long way from the top-down antics of the original *Grand Theft Auto*. The red-headed stepchild of this genre is the preposterously ambitious world of *The Getaway*, a near-perfect recreation of downtown London.

Perfect? There's no litter, no stench, and hardly any pedestrians. There are plenty of cars – those colourful little cough drops on wheels that Pommies drive – but they're so narrow it's often possible to simply drive between lanes of traffic. Memory is conserved by obscuring distant details with the notorious London Fog.

Those who get their impressions of England exclusively from the androgynous BBC will be in for a shock. *Black Monday* treats us to that long-neglected side of British culture – gritty urban crime. This is a man's world, a testosterone-drenched milieu of MP-5 toting armed police. It's as though Team Soho set out to compensate for every emasculated episode of The Bill in one fell swoop. If only that were possible.

We're soon introduced to the troubled world of Mitch, a hard-as-nails copper with a dark past. His opening mission is a right bloodbath, steering him through a raid on a drug gang operating out of a housing estate. The first casualty of *Black Monday* is political correctness, as the pigs make short work of a horde of AK-toting gangsters. There's the option to subdue and arrest suspects - shades of the underrated *Judge Dredd* FPS in there – but the standard response is to blast away at any perceived threat. The second casualty? Human shields. They're not made of metal; fire off enough rounds, and some will hit the terrorist on the other side.

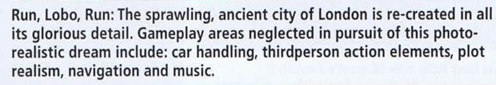
The third casualty is the illusion of non-linearity. Most of the time one is forced to follow the all-too-faint car blinkers to make turns from A to B, and on to Z in this alien inner-urban sprawl.

It's difficult to tell where the attention to detail ends and the programming shortcomings begin. Under body armour and suppressing fire, these geezers are painfully slow. Without the comfort zone of iron sights vast quantities of ammo go to waste. In the interests of gritty realism there's no giant flashing arrows or HUD mapping advice, making the pedestrian action focussed and intense – assuming the player isn't lost.

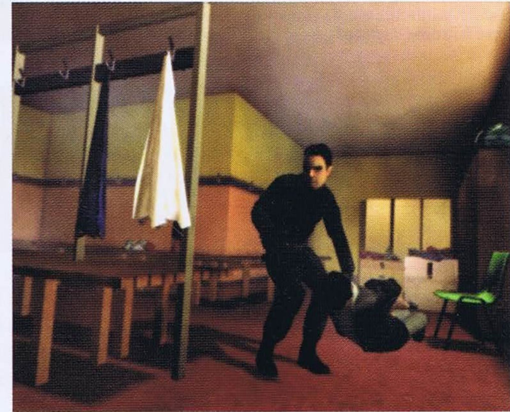
There are three playable characters, lots of swearing, and a strong linear story. These elements endeared it to a large section of the mainstream audience who weren't actively seeking to critique it, and that same audience will doubtlessly lap it all up again. But for a second-generation product it feels very rough around the edges; still a 3D street directory in search of a game. **[6]**

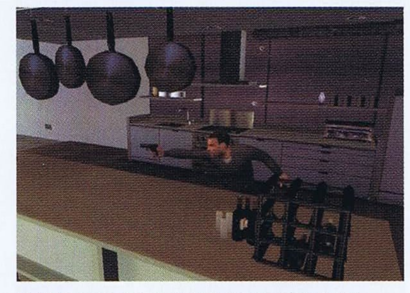


Commando cop Mitch is troubled by memories of a young offender he shot dead. So what better therapy than mercilessly exterminating criminals, with nary a Miranda right in sight



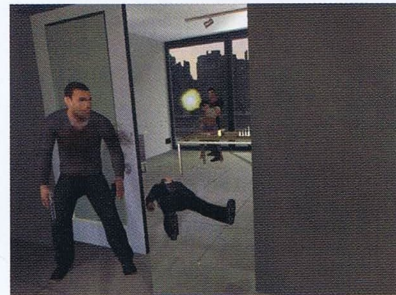
Run, Lobo, Run: The sprawling, ancient city of London is re-created in all its glorious detail. Gameplay areas neglected in pursuit of this photo-realistic dream include: car handling, thirdperson action elements, plot realism, navigation and music.





A bit like that scene in the Young Ones where Vivian destroys the set of The Good Life, here we can see our hero trashing Jamie's Kitchen, another British TV haunt





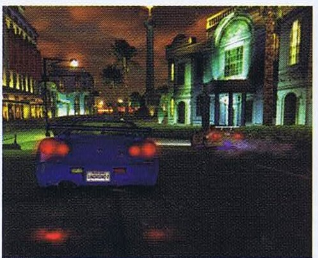
Adhering to the rules of sensible room-clearing tactics is crucial to staying alive in the game. If the controls, particularly with the viewpoint were a little more friendly, this wouldn't be so unintentionally demanding on the player

## Bet on Black



If nothing else, Black Monday displays incredible atention to detail with regards to environments and inanimate objects. Vehicle and human models alike have been given impressive facelifts, though the humans seem a little more cartoon-like as a result. Perhaps third time will be the charm...

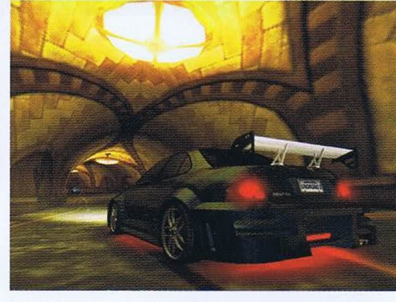




This may look like two cars having a spontaneous drag race, but sadly unlike Tokyo Highway Battle, this is not a feature of the Need for Speed Unground games



NFUS2 is a game for those who prioritise style over substance. Casting a nice healthy neon glow is every bit as important as the regular goals, like finishing a race first for example...

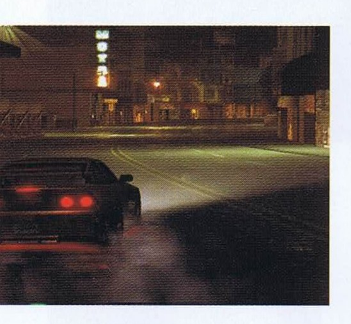


The benefits of working with ficticious subject matter run a lot further than being able to design levels to suit gameplay - The textures on the roof of this tunnel is an example of how a little bit of fantasy can add to the aethetic merits of the game as well



# NEED FOR SPEED UNDERGROUND 2

FORMAT: GCN, PS2, XBOX (VERSION TESTED) PUBLISHER: ELECTRONIC ARTS DEVELOPER: EA CANADA PRICE: $99.95 RELEASE: OUT NOW PRICE: $99.95 RELEASE: NOW



As a staple EA brand, *Need For Speed* has a storied history; ups, downs, ins and outs – the series has coalesced to a point of sheer undulated racing bliss. EA Canada's ability to utilise the rich history of the franchise has allowed the developer a palette of tools able to expand the 'more-is-better' motif so many other developers opt for, in spades. *NFSU2* is everything you want from what we were privy too in the last iteration, and then some.

The game's open plan city is sprawling – some 200 square km we're told, and driving around it certainly conveys the feeling that it's at least that large. There are an inordinate number of race styles available to you based on your car, cash and ability, but it's hub the game sells to punters, and Bayview (the game's city) will become your racing and driving mecha for as long as you can endure a lifetime in the driver's seat.

*NFSU2* has expanded on most of the popular aspects of the original game. Players can participate in a number of races from Drag, Drift and Circle to Sprint, Street X or Free Run. While the crux of the Story Mode, and indeed the meat of the game, the Underground Racing League is by far the most rewarding prospect for racing enthusiasts, and it's in this section of game *NFS* aficionados will feel most at home.

The Story Mode is presented with a guide, one Brooke Bourke (E!, Wild On, Playboy), and she slowly provides progressively more access to the underground racing mecha through her many contacts and sassy ability. Though Story Mode is not the only point of *NFSU2* and EA does much to enforce a sense of freedom to players second only to the likes of *Midnight Club*.

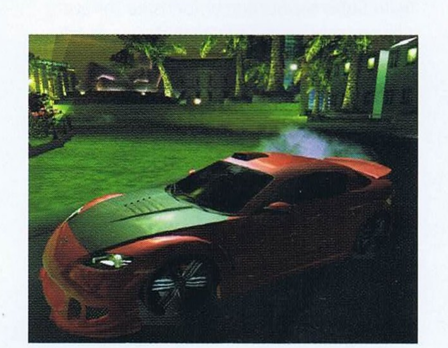
Visually, *NFSU2* is by far the most impressive iteration of the series with blinding cityscapes, bump-mapped surfaces, highly detailed car models and a slick presentation. While *Burnout 3* sits at one end of the racing spectrum as a series of quick fix events, *NFSU2* sits comfortably as a career-orientated driving game .

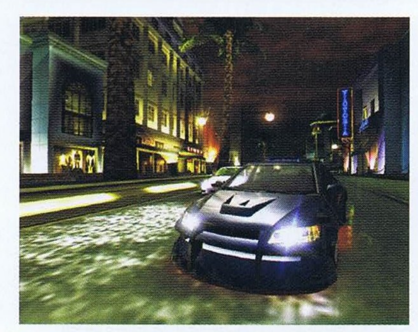
By far the best in the franchise and another marketable notch on the EA belt, *NFSU2* will succeed regardless of a review score. Anyone having second thoughts should rethink their position, as you won't find a better street racer on any console at present. Of course, those questing for a true simulation, or anyone who cringes at the whole car-culture phenomenon will find this one a little hard to swallow. **[7]**

## Dangerous Curves



**EA's ability to nurture the fan is second to none, and this time with the inclusion of Playboy Bunny Brooke Burke, they've outdone themselves. As a character in the game Brooke's personality is definitely suited to the style of game – she's tough, sexy and very demanding. Her visual presence is pseudos-real with touches of CG added to maintain the suspension of disbelief. At any rate, as a selling point, Burke's inclusion in the game will definitely excite.**



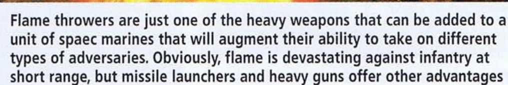


Although the effect is a little 'low-res' in this image, bump-mapping has been used to bring the road surface to life compared to prior instalments in the series



# DAWN OF WAR

FORMAT: PC RELEASE: OUT NOW PRICE: $99.95
PUBLISHER: THQ DEVELOPER: RELIC



Flame throwers are just one of the heavy weapons that can be added to a unit of spaec marines that will augment their ability to take on different types of adversaries. Obviously, flame is devastating against infantry at short range, but missile launchers and heavy guns offer other advantages

Perhaps more commonly played in the British Isles, Warhammer 40,000 has been a tabletop minature wargame few can afford to play – it requires a serious commitment of time and money. With turgid rubbish like *Fire Warrior* representing the franchise, there's been little evidence to suggest Warhammer would ever make the move to videogaming succesfully, until *Dawn of War* proved it's simply never been done properly before.

Using the same richly detailed universe and backstory, *Dawn of War* has everything a succesful RTS could want - four warring races to play as, all of which use a blend of technology and sorcery to overcome all that would oppose them. The almost Blizzard-like look of the game is not an accident, simply because Blizzard copied the Warhammer art style years ago for *Warcraft*.

Like this year's *Ground Control 2*, *Dawn of War* is an RTS that rewards the player for capturing strategic points of interest, and encourages aggressive play. Those afraid of wading into combat until they're certain of victory will find themselves on trapped the back foot.

*Dawn of War* moves even further away from the usual RTS ideal of making each individual trooper a single unit, as infantry are dealt with as squads. A squad can be reinforced with more troops, armed with heavier weaponry, commanded by a sergeant, and sometimes led by a hero unit. All of these augmentations are accessed by a panel in the interface that the player uses to 'top up' their forces. It makes the idea of sending units into battle and pulling them out as they take a few casualties so that they can be reinforced and thrown back into the fray.

Ludicrous as the notion of futuristic armies wanting to engage in melee combat when they're armed with ultra-powerful firearms, this fictional phenomenal that the Games Workshop have clung on to over the years adds strategic options to Dawn of War. More important than the basic strategic implications is the profound visceral edge the hand-to-hand combat brings, something the vast majority of strategy titles lack. Watching a mechanised demon swat four stalwart space marine troopers aside with one swipe of its over-sized limb adds not only a comical touch, but successfully conveys the sensation of power and impact in a way most RTS games fail at miserably.

Past these points *Dawn of War* does little to champion new features or ideas, but Relic can be proud of successfully capturing the essence and spirit of a rich gaming universe that has always been handled so poorly. Ultimately, this is a strategy game that lends itself well to fast, aggressive multiplayer gaming, without needing to be a virtuoso with keyboard shortcuts and other pitfalls of detachment. **[7]**



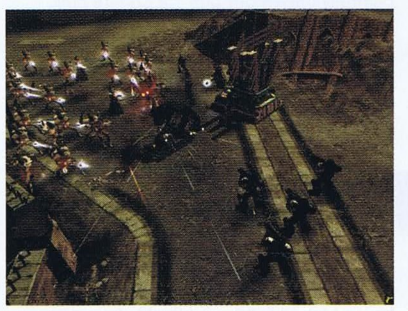
It may look complicated, but this skirmish only involves three or four units in total, so even though there's lots of bodies, there's little for the player to have to deal with in practice





Teleportation is a vital tool for players to learn to utilise so that they can break away from a formula of simply matching troops back and forth, in and out of counter attacks the hard way





Heavily outnumbered a small unit of four Space Marines take on a host of Eldar warriors to the left, with a lone mechanised Dreadnaught evening the odds considerably. Once in melee combat, these larger units a literally swat enemy units aside like rag dolls

## Paint the Clown Red



**If you've spent all your money on painting miniatures to play the original Warhammer 40K, Relic have include a unit painter that allows players to personalise the look of their units. It's not a unique feature, but shows how Relic have stayed true to the ideals of the game. *Dawn of War* won't kill the Games Workshop's miniature sales, but with these features, it comes close.**





Player choices fit together like Russian dolls to create a persona. You must choose carefully if you intend playing for the 1,000+ hours some Japanese players have already clocked




Square Enix has been remarkably attentive in providing seasonal special events for players. The most recent, Summer Fest, saw a daily fireworks display, fishing competitions and some unique stealth questing opportunities

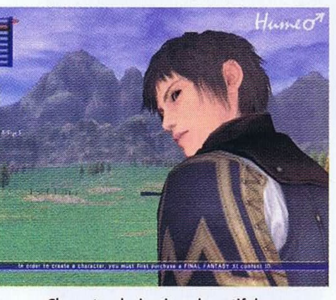


It will be some time before you can fly airships. Until then, a ferry service operates to a strict timetable, enabling pioneering players to skip continents. Occasionally, the ferry will be attacked by a hulking sea monster, which scours the ship for quaking passengers



# FINAL FANTASY XI

FORMAT: PC, PS2 PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: SQUARE ENIX
PRICE: PC: $89.95; PS2: US$100 ($131) CONTAINS HARD DRIVE AND NETWORK ADAPTER RELEASE: OUT NOW ($U PC AND US PS2), TBA (AU PS2)



Character design is as beautiful as you would expect from Square. Many idle evenings can be spent eyeing yourself up

To crowbar even a superficial description of a perennial universe complete with its own diverse races, nations, laws, racial tensions, auction-houses, manufacturing guilds, fishing clubs, public transport networks and social interactions on to a printed page is asking too much. Functionally and socially, *FFXI*'s world is realised fully enough to inspire possible emigration from reality. In testament to this, a sombre warning at every startup urges players not to neglect friends, family and work commitments in favour of life in the world of Vana'diel.

The PAL gamer's two-year wait following *FFXI*'s Japanese release may have been painfully drawn out but, for Square Enix, this time has unfurled a runaway success story. Vana'diel's subscriber numbers now dwarf the likes of *Ultima* and *EverQuest*. But that is not to say that *FFXI* is radically different to the others. Generically, this is a shift from traditional *Final Fantasy* gameplay – a complete step into traditional MMORPG form and function, albeit told in the language and furnished with the trappings of *FF*'s familiar universes. So you are given a moogle for your *Animal Crossing*-style furnishable room; huge airships transport players from city to city; and hired chocobos race across landscapes that lower-level characters trek for hours to traverse. However, most of the core gameplay elements have been seen elsewhere before, and *FFXI*'s success has come from a complex cocktail of brand weight, considered execution and some masterful Japanese attention to detail.

Any MMORPG must stand on its online community, and *FFXI* cannily encourages player interaction throughout. While soloing enemies is repetitive, mindless and ultimately futile, joining a party reveals layers of delightful complexity. Here, a self-appointed leader must pull together a team of six people from the range of jobs available to players (initially one of six standard jobs, with nine further classes revealing themselves as you quest at later levels). A well-balanced party will consist of tanks (warriors), offensive and defensive mages and damage dealers (ninjas and samurai). The countless possible party concoctions mean every team must play to its strengths: an ill-managed group will stumble. It's possible to switch classes and level-up a different job at any time, and, at level 18, you can even add a sub-job, opening the dynamics (and character abilities) even wider. Outside of battle the game encourages clan mentality with its Linkshell groups. Linkshell members can be contacted at any time, and this encourages an invaluable community spirit.

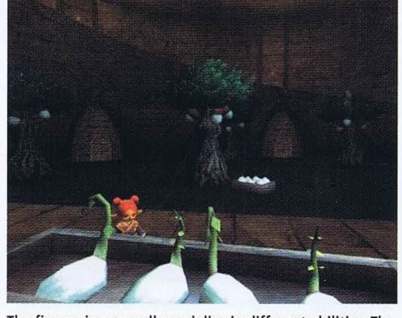
*FFXI* may not technically be the future of MMORPGs, as there's no ignoring its derivative nature. However, it has cleverly assimilated all the elements that make the genre so popular and married them with international brand popularity well beyond the reach of other, more ghettoised MMORPGs. These games require a huge investment of time and resources from publisher and player alike, and, with a slew of new titles on the horizon, *FFXI* has, at least, vastly broadened the consumer pool. For most, real life permits just one MMORPG at a time: it will take a brave new world to provoke an exodus from this delivered promised land. **[8]**



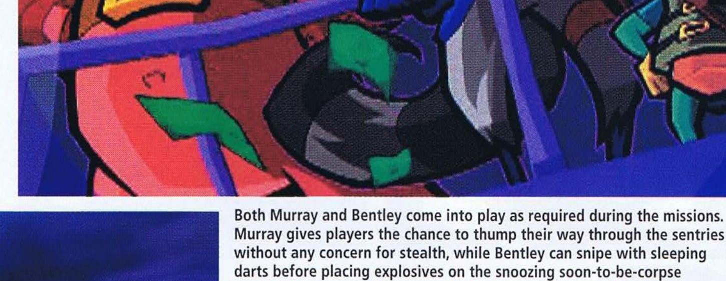
## Square-eyed synergy

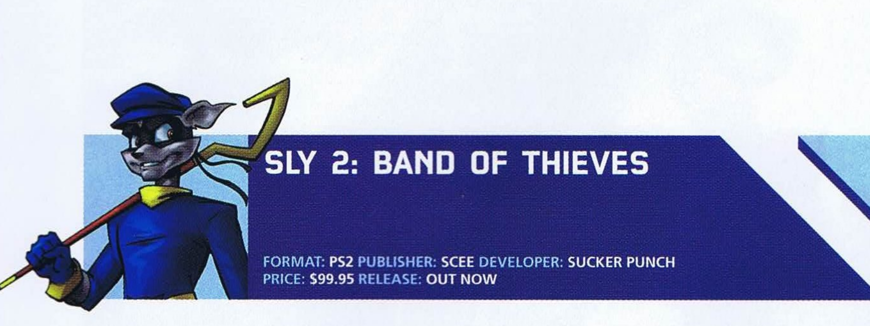


**After a few months playing the US PS2 version, it's good to see that the PC iteration runs in the exact same manner, the only difference being how a high-spec PC considerably beautifies the slightly ragged PS2 graphics. There's no distinction between PC or PS2 players online so the synergy is seamless, and this represents one of Square Enix's greatest triumphs in what is essentially the first cross-platform and cross-continent MMORPG. The latest add-on, *Chains Of Promathia*, delivers a surprisingly large amount of plot expansion as well as some spanking new vistas for higher-level players.**



The five main races all specialise in different abilities. The tiny Tarutarus make expert mages, although their stylised Kawaii speech patterns will eventually grate with most





# SLY 2: BAND OF THIEVES

FORMAT: PS2 PUBLISHER: SCEE DEVELOPER: SUCKER PUNCH
PRICE: $99.95 RELEASE: OUT NOW

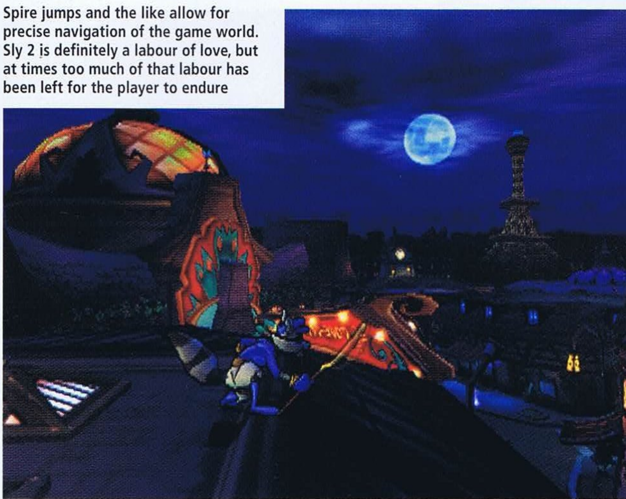
For whatever reason, Sly Raccoon – unlike wannabe-PS2-mascot stablemates Ratchet and Jak – has been afforded a gap year, a chance to twist and restructure himself in a far wilder and significant manner than just, say, a slick annual upgrade. And to some extent he's done just that, swapping the more funnelled, generic level-by-level progression of the original for a game set in a series of worlds that are as much a hub for overly elaborate heist scenarios (that veer from the tiresomely tenuous to the genuinely ingenious) as they are for more relaxed and freeform play. But *Sly 2*'s problem is that while it's shrugged off the plain partitioning of the original, it has, seemingly voluntarily, given the player some flatly dull and elongated goals to pursue.

There's nothing wrong with any given objective in *Sly 2* per se. In fact, the choice to allow the player to carve their own silent trail around each of the seven hub levels (each of which is an expansive spectacle to drink in, decked out in typically warm and chunky colours) in pursuit of their clearly marked goals seems, initially at least, to be a refreshing one. But there's a stifling dependence on making the player repeat the same act over and over in a barely remixed fashion. These thoughtless multi-part objectives – where doing something once is a joy, but being made to do it five more times across the level isn't – soon grind that fresh feeling of flexibility into something far more wearisome and hollow.

This self-restricting need to extend the game's lifespan through manual labour is *Sly 2*'s only major drawback, but it's a fundamental one. Otherwise, it's a game that bristles with confident control; its approach to stealth is still lightweight, but cleanly defined and all the more malleable and sure-footed for it. And, once again, Sucker Punch has crafted a game that glows with world-class animation, flawless audio design (from the bassy twangs attributed to your footsteps when you're inside the detection range of an enemy sentry, to the cheeky clink of a hidden 'clue' bottle) and boundless visual personality.

*Sly 2*'s highest points are when it's at its most hectic and, ironically, most linear – those frenzied climaxes of each episode when all the strands of the heist come together, with control flicking between each of the three characters as they work to bring the masterplan to fruition. And its minigames and more novel goals are well-honed delights.

But that over-dependence on legwork throughout the bulk of each world robs the game of its sparkle, making it feel more work-ethic sweatshop than well-paced sweetshop. It's a masterpiece-in-waiting, so preoccupied with the petty crime of repetition that its variety and imagination are forced to remain in the small time. **[6]**



Spire jumps and the like allow for precise navigation of the game world. Sly 2 is definitely a labour of love, but at times too much of that labour has been left for the player to endure

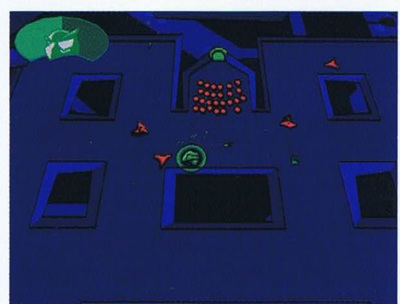


Both Murray and Bentley come into play as required during the missions. Murray gives players the chance to thump their way through the sentries without any concern for stealth, while Bentley can snipe with sleeping darts before placing explosives on the snoozing soon-to-be-corpse



Multiple abilities for each character are up for grabs, very few of which are actually compulsory. But Sly's optional smoke cloud ability, for example, proves itself essential for making swift and easy getaways after being spotted





One of the best – and, thankfully, most common – minigames is Bentley's hacking program that takes place in a virtual 2D shoot 'em up field. One stick moves your craft, while the other fires in whatever direction is required as you fend off the unrelenting waves of anti-virus craft while chipping away at protective walls

## Wheels of steal




**Of the few distractions, the most enjoyable is Sly's ability to pickpocket enemies by trailing behind them and hooking some swag out of their purses. The first few swipes will uncover a handful of coins, with the third and fourth attempts often turning up a valuable item. Once back at the gang's HQ, these can be sold off via Thiefnet, the game's 'online' portal, where such spoils can be converted into new abilities.**

Despite having an arduous calibration system, Puyo Pop is one of the solidest games. The puyos respond to your body with perfect accuracy – bouncing off your arms and piling up in the crook of your neck



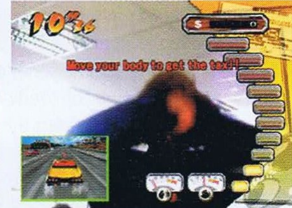







The Samba De Amigo minigame is not very far from being a perfect port of the original – not including the minigames and Perfect challenges. The calibration can be very forgiving on easier levels, although this has the effect of actually making the game harder, as every move of your body sets off an audible chh-chh-chh of phantom maracas






## SEGA SUPERSTARS

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: $69.95
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: THQ
DEVELOPER: SEGA

Two moments best define *Sega Superstars*, and they happen straight after each other. The first is the moment – 60 seconds in – when *Nights* clicks and you honestly feel like you're flying. The second is the moment – 60 seconds after that – when the pain begins and you realised that the richness of Sega's back catalogue means a whole new repertoire of upper-body agony.

It's impossible to fault how irrepressible Sega has been in taking on the EyeToy challenge. All the company's icons, old and new, have been required to show up for this new kind of gaming PE, and they've all been asked to adapt, evolve or completely reinvent their gameplay to cope with camera control. So *Samba De Amigo* involves almost identical motions to the original, *Super Monkey Ball* moves from one-thumb control to no-thumb control, and *Puyo Pop* ditches being a puzzle game entirely and invents a new kind of juggling instead.

Some play mechanics are old, but enjoyably implemented, such as the bashing and dodging of *Virtua Fighter* and *House Of The Dead*. Other games such as *Nights* and *Super Monkey Ball* put you in a mini-control bubble, managing acceleration and tilt through the angle of your arms. These are subtler, but take more effort to master; even experienced players can find the controls lurching unexpectedly as they accidentally lose contact with the detection zone. Other games are simply bad ideas, poorly handled. The slap-happy controls for *Billy Hatcher* and *Chu Chu Rocket* are clumsy and exhausting, and while it's nice to see the EyeToy's microphone being used, hollering for a crazy taxi wears thin in a matter of seconds.

Structurally, the game is something of a disappointment. Each reinvented classic has a range of unlockable difficulty modes, but there's no preconfigured way to create the kind of multiplayer tournament that you're likely to want to construct. While it's slightly laudable that Sega has tried to move the EyeToy beyond being seen as a party game-only device, the singleplayer mode isn't sophisticated enough to compensate – there's no real sense of long-term progression or achievement as you hop from one minigame to the next. Victories do earn you rings, and these can be spent on in your chao garden on trinkets and treats for your blandly cute little pet. However, interaction here is also lacking and, in the end, it simply doesn't feel like much of a reward.

Sega has clearly been keeping an eye on Sony London, as *Superstars'* presentation is blindingly clean and crisp. However, it still falls prey to the menu-itis to which all EyeToy games seem prone. So the complaints that can be levelled against *Superstars* are real, but so is the magic it contains. When it works, *Monkey Ball* truly feels like you're tilting the land, not moving the ball. When it works, *Nights* makes you think you can fly.

EyeToy is at a stage at which its games need to be judged not on how close they come to perfection, but on whether or not they advance the potential of the hardware, and Sega has taken the device and pointed it in a very promising direction. **[7]**




Space Channel 5 veterans know that the only way to win is to groove while you play – now it's an essential tactic




Virtua Fighter (the demo screenshots show a boy playing instead of a girl, just in case anyone thought it was for sissies) is a devastatingly simply idea. Be ready for neck ache as you struggle to stand sideways and see the TV

Of the 12 main games, the destructive DIY is probably the weakest. The rest have a hit-to-miss ratio that would make other EyeToy games weak with jealousy







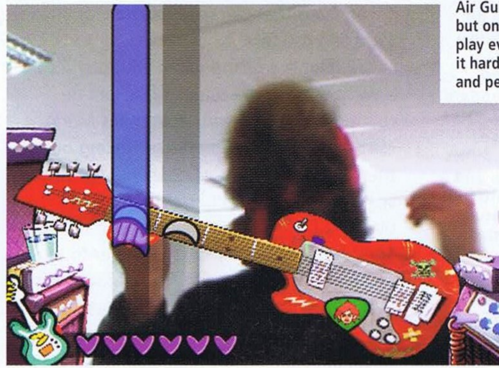
# EYETOY: PLAY 2

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: $99.95 (BUNDLE), $30 (SOLUS)
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: SCEE
DEVELOPER: SONY LONDON STUDIO

The first thing that becomes apparent when playing *Play 2* is that the people who made it have *done this before*. After a disappointing drought, there's been a deluge of EyeToy games over the last few months, but all have had a slight air of hesitant experimentation. *Play 2* really knows what it's doing.

The range of movements it calls upon you to produce is bigger than in the original, and their detection is more precise, a combination which opens up a much larger range of gaming possibilities. Air Guitar, possibly the game's strongest suit (something London Studio knows – it comes up preselected when you load the game) is exactly as it sounds. Thrash the strings with one hand, form flat Play-doh chords with the other: rock stance entirely optional. Bubble Pop is a first for EyeToy – a game of delicate restraint. Pop the clear bubbles and avoid the red. It should be simple but isn't, due to some calculatedly nasty level design. Soon you'll be contorted and sweating, but from tension rather from exertion.

*Play 2* also mixes up the range of movements each game asks of you. Rather than a one-note task, repeated over and over, each game is split into levels with bosses and microgames breaking up the pace (and shifting the strain on to a fresh muscle group). Mr Chef has you filling orders in a restaurant, dragging burger ingredients on to a plate. Run out of anything and you'll trigger a microgame – pickle-slicing, milk-shaking or chip-salting. Hit a home run in the baseball game and you'll need to drop your improvised bat and run on the spot – arms pumping – to power your character round the bases. It's a very clever step, meaning that each game lasts longer than in the original *Play* but is less tiring and much more engaging.



Air Guitar is irresistible at its simplest, but once the 'slide' move comes into play even the shyest wallflower will find it hard to resist doing Mick Jagger's lips, and perhaps even Angus Young's legs

The Play Room is a range of diversions and special effects, including the magic wand system which was many people's first glimpse of EyeToy. These feel very much like experiments, although often the simpler (like a screen of swooshing colour which responds to a sound input) are more successful than the complicated (like the face-capture and morphing system, which is too cumbersome and slow to suit the software).

The presentation is as characterful as you would expect from London Studio, it's welcoming to newcomers to the EyeToy, or even to gaming in general, and the navigation system has been much improved, responding snappily to your commands. All in all, the studio's experience with the system shines through, and this is crucial. After all, it's not just the developer that's done this before – you have, too. The problem with a system so approachable and so instantly comprehensible is that everyone who touches an EyeToy thinks they're an expert. With *Play 2*, London Studio has shown us what expertise really looks like. **[8]**



It may wear its Samba De Amigo heritage rather clearly on its sleeve, but the pops, twonks and thumps of the virtual drum kit make you feel closer to a freeform jazz soloist than ever before. Nice

Bubble Pop demonstrates perfectly how crucial good audio design is to an EyeToy game. Its later stages, where thousands of bubbles stream past as you try to squidge the clear ones and preserve the red ones, should qualify for the gaming hall of fame





# FLATOUT

FORMAT: PC, PS2, XBOX (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: $79.95
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: EMPIRE INTERACTIVE
DEVELOPER: BUGBEAR



## Burning rubbernecker



**Extra special mention has to go to *FlatOut*'s bonus games, which take ragdoll physics to their giggling and slightly worrying conclusion. Among more standard events such as destruction derbies and figure-of-eight race mash-ups, there are gruesome Olympics (such as the long/high jump, and giant games of darts and skittles) that involve ejecting your drivers through the windscreen at the optimal moment (and angle) to get them to fly as far or as high as possible. Watching them twist and flop through the air is as hilarious a pleasure as it is a guilty one, before they plop down to the ground with a thud and a comical yelp. The lack of blood or damage to your driver helps keep it far less controversial than it might initially appear.**

*FlatOut* is, quite literally, a breakthrough. While taking the first corner of your first race and inevitably overshooting, you pile into the roadside barriers expecting a harsh metallic crash as your vehicle meets an immovable object. But there isn't one. Instead, the barriers slide and tip, giving way. Wooden fences snap and splinter into planks. Stacks of tyres scatter over the track, turning it into a minefield of precarious cobbles and speed traps that can spell disaster for anyone travelling too fast.

*FlatOut* is a racing game with physics as a weapon, and the tumps of deliberate roadside props are your ammo. It's *Mario Kart* meets *Destruction Derby*: taking out the supporting struts of conveniently placed scaffolding will send barrels spilling all over the track like so many banana skins and green shells, as much a danger to you on subsequent laps as to your immediate rivals. It also encourages and rewards such destructive behaviour by giving you nitro boost in return for damage caused by your vehicle, making that risky detour into a pile of logs doubly tempting.

It's a moderately pretty game, too, brought alive as much by its physics-experiment nature as the slightly fuzzy filter that adorns the visuals, smoothing them somewhat without clogging up the visibility. There's little variety in the tracks, however, meaning that races swiftly begin to feel too samey, but the unpredictability of the house-of-cards setup of it all usually means that spillages, bottlenecks and emergent hazards rarely strike twice, which helps soothe the thematic repetition of the courses. It's a fact helped by some unforced AI behaviour, as rivals seem as susceptible to the whims of Newton's laws as you.

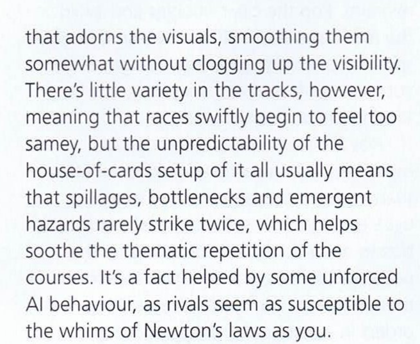
But it soon becomes clear that this is as much a curse as it is a blessing. Games that offer unpredictability and chaos inevitably frustrate when it comes to making progress in a well-paced manner. A single shunt from a rival, a pratfall from the driver in front, or just glancing a tyre stack at an unlucky angle on the final corner can send you into a disastrous crash that costs you any chance of a top-three position. The track reset that places you back on the course seems to be an equal lottery – at times it drops you generously close to the scene of your accident, at others it warps you right to the back of the pack.

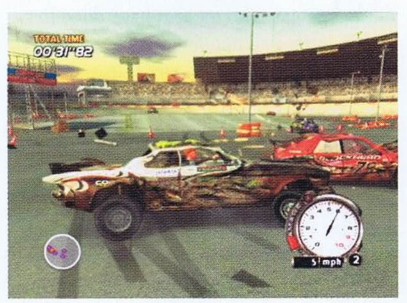
This is a game that's as riotously entertaining as it is viciously random, but it's also one in which you soon begin to wish that your tools for chaos were more elaborate than the roadside equivalent of a pyramid of tins just waiting to be scattered for mischief. It's gleeful automobile slapstick, but not for anyone who values skill and achievement more than taking a wrecking ball to their opponents' racing lines. **[7]**



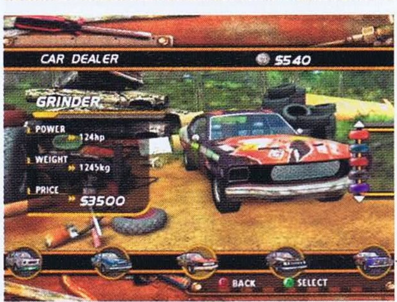


FlatOut isn't so much trapped between a rock and a hard place as a log and a barrel; the moshpit of impromptu chaos is a trade-off for being able to race without the threat of disaster striking at any moment of play










Vehicles can be upgraded simply, but you'll have to sell your car when purchasing a new, higher-level vehicle to take on the later races. Although untested at the time of writing, Xbox Live and System Link play also feature

While FlatOut does feature joypad rumble, it's curiously limited to collisions, meaning that your vehicle seems strangely light when compared to the feel of cars in other recent racers



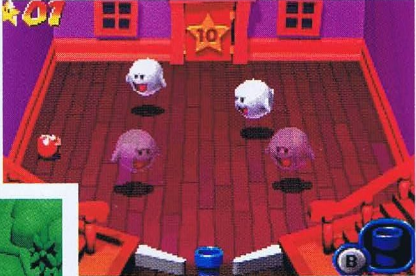




# SUPER MARIO BALL

FORMAT: GBA PRICE: $69.95 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: FUSE GAMES





The outsized sprites and chunky decoration give the impression of a crowded, busy environment. Most screens are too sparsely furnished, however, to create the rattling action pinball fans crave

It must take something special for the famously picky Nintendo to buy a pitch, on spec, from an unproven British startup – let alone one that bears the stamp of its flagship character. Faced with the finished *Super Mario Ball* (known Stateside as *Mario Pinball Land*, a prosaic title which nonetheless nails its boss-battling, puzzle-solving, themed adventure pinball) you have to ask: what persuaded the company?

Perhaps it was Fuse's command of the GBA, for there is convincing speed, solidity and depth to the compacted mascot's tumbles and rebounds around the pseudo-3D screens. Or maybe it was its artists; while some may find the prerendered gloss makes for a peculiarly charmless Mushroom Kingdom, there's no denying that the overall effect is impressively vivid, and respectably clear.

It could be that Nintendo saw imagination, cunning and humour in the fledgling developer. All are evident in the pinball-but-not concept, in the clever spatial structure and in the sly design of the star challenges on each screen. Or, just maybe, its head was turned by flattery, because *Mario Ball* is a touching love letter to *Mario 64*, quoting everything from the coins to the cannons, the sunken ship to the star-powered doors.

Whatever the reasons, they blinded Nintendo to one simple truth: like the close cousins they are, pinball and videogames shouldn't breed beyond mere mimicry. Replacing the subconscious chaos of the former with the rational furniture of the latter (objectives, routes, items) demands precision and a level of interaction that a set of flippers just can't provide. Luck plays a huge part, and simply navigating the world can be exactly as hard as the hardest challenge: a random, enraging, minutes-long bore, especially with moving enemies straying across your line.

*Super Mario Ball* might still have been a noble misconception (on a par with Sony's clever half-breed, *Flipnic*) were its basic flaw not inflamed by some woeful design choices, such as forcing stars earned to be picked up with a direct hit, or closing doors if they're all opened by accident. Maybe these little cruelties were intended to spin out its tiny lifespan by increasing its difficulty, but all they will do is gnaw away at your patience with what is a maddening, misguided mongrel of a game. **[4]**



An excruciating, but mercifully brief, intro movie dispenses with the cursory 'plot'. Even with your rosiest Nintendo glasses on, the blank-eyed, lifeless renders of Mario and friends seem to be doing nothing but going through the motions



# X-MEN LEGENDS

FORMAT: XBOX, PS2 (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: $89.95
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION DEVELOPER: RAVEN

The Marvel X-Men are a collective of characters that lend themselves well to gaming, at least in some instances, such as Capcom's 2D fighting game crossover with *Street Fighter*. Taking the action-ready nature of the spandex-clad crusaders, and incorporating their mutant powers into the developable skill sets of an RPG, Raven's *X-Men Legends* is a beat 'em up/RPG hybrid.

*X-Men Legends* has taken the action-RPG places it has never been with the ability to control a group of four characters at once, but that's the only really innovation here, as Raven have all but copied the *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance* formula. The same skill development system is there, and even the interface for using special powers is the same. In effect, it's just replacing monsters and spells for mutants and powers, but managing the X-Men adds a tactical element that the fantasy romp lacks. With the ability to set basic combat AI for teammates, and to assume control of any of the four X-Men in the group, it's possible to tailor the way the group works.

Patrick Stewart's commanding voice adds some familiarity, and a script penned by former Marvel writers brings authority, but the game engine is conducive to handling a frenetic fracas rather than telling a tale. So despite all that official licensing, original story and content, *X-Men Legends* remains a game for those in search of an epic, progressive beat 'em up. It's simply too mechanical to feel like an adventure at all.

*X-Men Legends* could have stood out as a complete evolution of this budding genre with more memorable locations, greater variety, and more storytelling flair, but it was merely a very decent game instead. **[7]**



Geared more towards fans of the comics than the movies, X-Men Legends includes more obscure characters such as the aptly dubbed 'Blob'




Characters such as Cyclops make for great companions, as his specialty in ranged combat combines well for a player with a front-line role




One of X-Men Legends' biggest failings lies in its lack of viewpoints that offer a suitable information about the player's surroundings. It's always a bit too close - prettier, but useless


ZELDA

# TIME EXTEND

## THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: MAJORA'S MASK

FORMAT: **N64**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE DATE: **2000**



**In the first of our second sittings with important titles of recent years we look at the oddest, darkest and saddest of all Zelda games**

Long before MEGATON!!! there was TRIFORCE!!! Nintendo rumours have always been fuelled by hope as much as by hype, and 1999 was no different. As Zelda devotees faced the horrible prospect of actually finishing *Ocarina of Time* – seven long years of waiting capped by a brief fortnight of ecstatic gaming – whispers of a hidden quest began to spread. By learning the Song of Sages (or unlocking Dark Link, or finding the invisible chest in the Great Deku Tree, or catching two big fish in a row, or just buying it for 500 rupees, depending on who you asked) you could actually find the Triforce. Suddenly that trio of triangles on the item screen made sense, suddenly there was something to take the sting out of Ganon's final curses. The dubious screenshots that accompanied the rumours were duly debunked, of course, and nintendo.com apologised for exacerbating the situation with an ill-judged April Fool. The Triforce was officially unobtainable.

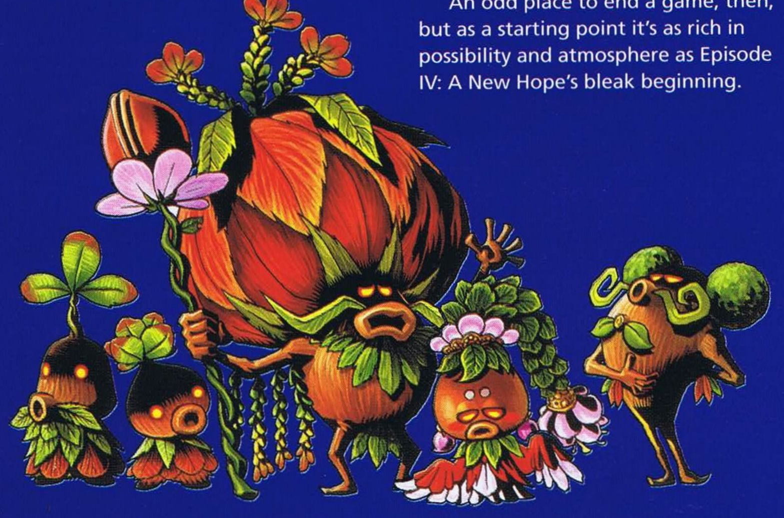
There was a reason for the insatiable thirst for that rumour to be true, however, and it's one that isn't often talked about. For something that's popularly recognised as The Greatest Game Ever Made, *Ocarina* ends on a bleak and hollow note. It's not something you notice in the jubilation of besting Ganon and watching the celebrations spread across the land. But as you sit, staring at 'Please reset your Nintendo 64', the excitement begins to drain out of you and in its place rises something darker. Imagine it. Link, again a boy, returns to a world ignorant of the fate from which he's saved it. He's a hero no one's heard of, a saviour of a non-existent armageddon. And he's not a boy any more, although he looks like one. He's fought and lived as a man, felt his boy-like adoration for Zelda mature as he meets her again in adult form. Where can he go? He has learned on his travels that he doesn't belong with the Kokiri. He isn't a forest fairy, he's discovered, and never was; he's an orphan abandoned first by his dying mother and now by Navi, who leaves him as he returns the Master Sword to its proper place. The future that unfolds in your mind once the credits roll is one of the subtlest, densest and saddest stories videogames have ever told.

An odd place to end a game, then, but as a starting point it's as rich in possibility and atmosphere as Episode IV: A New Hope's bleak beginning.

**The future that unfolds in your mind once the credits roll is one of the subtlest, densest and saddest stories videogames have ever told**

Link and Epona (for he's not totally alone) pace through a gloomy forest. The strange path of his adventure has exiled him from his home, and now he's lost in the strange world of Termina. Everything looks so familiar (although Link could hardly be expected to understand that it's because Termina's world is running on *Ocarina*'s engine) and yet everything looks so wrong. Then there's an attack, a theft, a bruising chase and a prank so viciously cruel as to steal the identity from a boy who had nothing else left to hold on to. Of all the moments that have been sanctified as representing 'that Nintendo magic', none has been so tearingly sad as when Deku Link first catches sight of his mutated, dejected reflection.

**It's one of** the finest motivations a videogame has ever given a player, and your desperation to recover Link's true form drives you through the first hours of the game. It's a necessary blessing – few games have begun with such a daringly off-putting few hours. Getting to grips with *Majora's* three-day cycle is one of gaming's rites of passage. Once you've got it clear in your head, it's hard to imagine how anyone ever struggled with it. But think back and remember how stressed you were as the hours ticked by like minutes (exactly like minutes, come to think of it) and that fifth Bomber kid still eluded you. Thousands of players never went back after those first bewildering 72 minutes, and little wonder. When they'd left off with *Ocarina* they'd been a superhero – armed to the teeth, dressed up to the nines, health bar stretching to the middle of the screen. Now they pick up the same





## GREEN CHEESE

Every 72 minutes – unless you rewind time – the game ends with the fat-toothed moon grinding into the earth in a red-tinged riot of furious destruction. Arriving on its surface is by far the single most startling moment in the game. You're geared up for something macabre, a horror-ridden hellhole that will keep you awake at nights. Instead you arrive on a world which is in a serene and beautiful stasis. For long moments it's a relief, and then a sense of sinister dread overtakes you. The people you meet and the conversations you have only amplify your uneasiness and in the end you come to fear its beautiful heart as much as its ugly exterior…

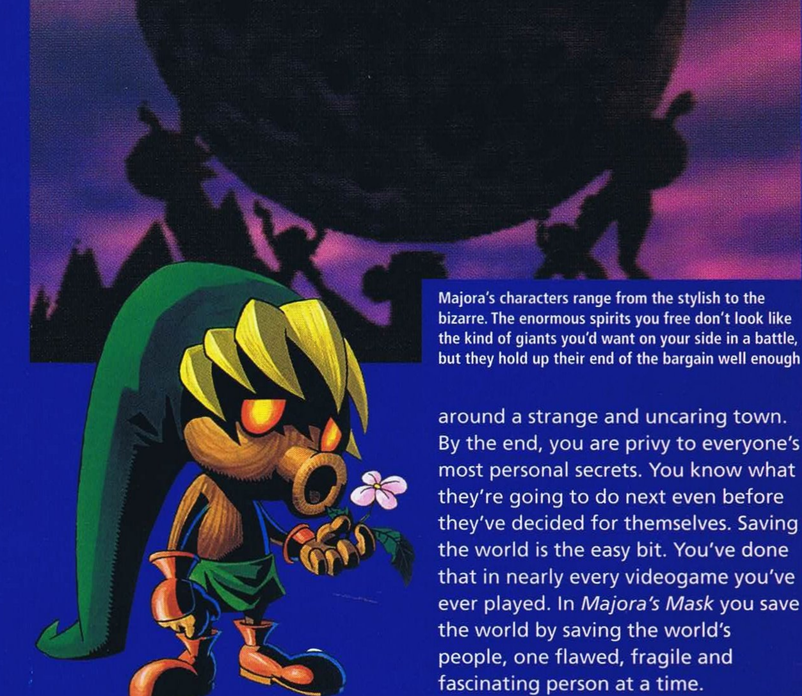
brand name, the same controller, and instead they're a helpless plant playing a game that they're guaranteed to lose. But they missed out, the people who let themselves be discouraged. They missed out on something wonderful.

**If this were** a review, there would have to be talk of *Majora*'s occasionally wayward camera. It would have to tut over the shortage of 'proper' dungeons and lament that Link's later transformations – to Goron and Zora respectively – aren't used as fully as his Deku persona. It would express reservations about the series' reliance on fetch-and-carry quests, on mazes and follow-my-leader. But this isn't a review, so those concerns can be gleefully sidestepped. Instead, what matters is what *Majora* got right, and it's only fair to say that a fair proportion of what it gets right was pinched from its older brother.

Once the initial stages of the game are complete, there is certainly plenty of *Zelda*-ing to be done. Although the four main dungeons aren't as meatily pleasing as the best in *Ocarina*, they are home to puzzle rooms and boss fights of a standard few games have since bettered. Mini-games, horseback archery, Skulltulla quests and heart piece collecting – if all you were looking for was an *Ocarina* add-on patch, there is much more familiarity here than first meets the eye.

In fact, the familiarity allows a better appreciation of the game's core achievements. No longer reeling from *Ocarina*'s three-dimensional revolution, *Majora* gives you time to enjoy the tiny details. To revel in the animated perfection of Deku Link's pirouette, or the way the imprisoned monkey claps his feet together. To savour the way familiar tunes become warped with a carnival hysteria as the end of the world approaches. And the grandeur of *Ocarina*'s epic tale is the perfect foil for *Majora*'s love of the absurd. There's nothing like an encroaching armageddon to make you appreciate the daftness of scottie-dog races and alien cow abductions.

However, for most, what they remember of *Majora* is its people. The repeating cycle of three days and three nights allows the game to introduce you to the citizens of Termina in an organic and believable way. Rather than being met by lumps of text or awkward speeches, you find out about people by seeing how they live, meeting them as they circle again and again through the last few days of their lives. Even the most incidental characters – the town guards and the officious Deku traders – let slip little human details which add enormous emotional weight to the game. And, as Link does his rounds, his place in the gameworld changes. At the start, you are the very definition of an outsider, wandering lost and wordless around a strange and uncaring town. By the end, you are privy to everyone's most personal secrets. You know what they're going to do next even before they've decided for themselves. Saving the world is the easy bit. You've done that in nearly every videogame you've ever played. In *Majora's Mask* you save the world by saving the world's people, one flawed, fragile and fascinating person at a time.



Majora's characters range from the stylish to the bizarre. The enormous spirits you free don't look like the kind of giants you'd want on your side in a battle, but they hold up their end of the bargain well enough

**As your familiarity** with Clock Town grows, the real reason for its name becomes clear – the whole town and everyone in it resolves into a giant clockwork machine – and you know every cog. From taking in a sinuous acrobatic performance in the cool night air to sharing Anju's heartbroken midnight vigil, your actions have the power to mend, change and shape these people's lives. Just because the game achieves this sophistication simply, with a few well-chosen lines of dialogue and a scrap of elegant animation, it doesn't lessen its impact. Solving all the subquests and collecting all the masks is the absolute opposite of an empty, 100 per cent complete-a-thon. Instead, it's a real emotional imperative, and finishing each person's story makes the game's final sequence a genuine delight. For a game with such a bleak beginning, it has perhaps the warmest ending ever crafted.

It's hard to over-emphasise *Majora*'s emotional achievements. Four years on, few developers have dared take on the lessons that it teaches about how to handle story and character in games. However, it's only the beginning of what the game has to teach. There are other essays to be written, on how it should have revolutionised game-saving systems, but didn't. On how delicately the

**You find out about people by seeing how they live, meeting them as they circle again and again through the last few days of their lives**




Some masks are more useless than others, and some are more sinister than beautiful, but the novelty of Link dressing up like someone else never wears off




Much of Majora's presentation draws on horror-film tradition. The gruesome character design, the jump-cuts of the Mask Seller's speeches, and the sickening rattle that accompanies the Skull Kid all owe their impact to film associations

subquests influence the way the main quests are played (try infiltrating the Pirate Fortress with and without the Stone Mask). On Anju and Kafei and what may be gaming's greatest love story. On how the game has influenced later *Zeldas* and how much blame it must bear for unleashing Tingle on an undeserving world. Then there are tales to tell, of frog-collecting and curse-lifting, of spider-catching and fairy-herding, but the best way to discover them isn't to read information in magazines. Instead, let the game tell you its story, whether for the first time or for a second, third or tenth. *Ocarina* may have been close to perfect, but *Majora's Mask* is twice as revealing – a link to the future as well as to the past.

# Studio profile

The people behind the games...

**COMPANY NAME:** Swordfish Studios Ltd

**DATE FOUNDED:** 2002

**NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:** 55

**HEAD OF STUDIO:** Trevor Williams (below left)

**KEY AREAS OF EXPERTISE:**
Proven track record in developing both mainstream and niche sports games. Ability to take complex sport such as rugby and turn it into enjoyable videogame experience. Storming-looking *Cold Winter* will be debut FPS title.









Cold Winter


World Champ Rugby 2



**LOCATION:**
Edgbaston, England

**URL:** www.swordfishstudios.com

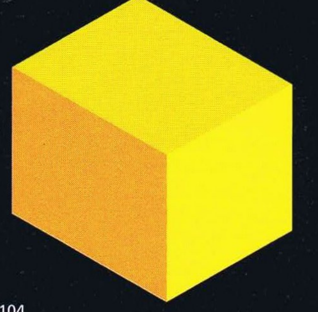
**KEY STAFF:**
Julian Widdows (development director), Andy Williams (sports development lead), Ian Flatt (sports development manager), Dave Percival (technical lead, *Cold Winter*).

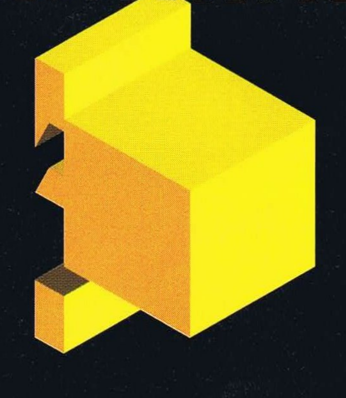
**SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:**
*Jonah Lomu Rugby* (PS1, Saturn, PC), *UEFA Striker* (PS1, Saturn), *Hostile Waters: Antaeus Rising* (PC), *World Championship Rugby* (PS2, Xbox, PC).

**PROPRIETARY TECHNOLOGY:**
Proprietary cross-platform sports development suite, consisting of audio, AI, physics and rendering engines running on PS2, Xbox and PC, all stored in in-house libraries. PS2 engine features average throughput of 110K polys per frame, with peak of 175K. *Cold Winter's* proprietary AI system features use of dynamic and static cover, movement between cover and through cover, and team orders (including fire support, movement under fire and grenade tactics, among others).

**CURRENT PROJECTS:**
*World Championship Rugby 2* (PS2, Xbox, PC – currently looking for new publishing partner), *Brian Lara Cricket* (Codemasters), *Cold Winter* (PS2, Vivendi Universal).

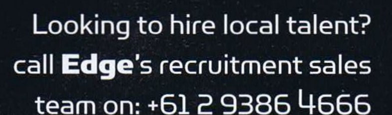
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# Codeshop

Tracking developments in development

## Rethinking PC patches

**The latest version of Aardwork's game patching service GameShadow extends the vision to mods, demos and drivers**



Tony Treadwell, CEO, Aardwork
www.gameshadow.com



With approximately 1,200 supported games and demos, GameShadow makes it straightforward to keep PC software up to date

As often happens with elegant solutions to messy technical problems, PC game patching service GameShadow seems stubbornly ahead of its time. Not in the sense that its content-delivery infrastructure is pushing the boundaries of what's possible, or even that it requires a sophisticated audience or costs a fortune to use. In such respects, it couldn't be much simpler or easier. Now supporting a range of patches for 1,200 games, all you have to do to gain access is download a client, which tells you what PC games are installed on your PC or network. Cleverly it can also tell the game version number, using this information to reveal if any newer patches are available. Even the financial cost is minimal; the annual subscription fee is a mere US$15. And the next version of GameShadow will see the company moving to wrap extra content such as mods, demos and movies around its patch delivery. Other gaming-related technology such as DirectX and graphics card drivers are also included as the service develops into the complete gaming-content management portal (see 'Moving Shadow').

But according to Aardwork's CEO, **Tony Treadwell**, the 12 months since we last covered the technology have underlined some significantly backward attitudes within the PC gaming market.

"We knew we'd have to build awareness with consumers," Treadwell explains. Potential obstacles include misconceptions about GameShadow introducing spyware or messing around with registry files; neither of which it does. There was also the issue that hardcore PC gamers, inveterate tinkerers to a man, seem to prefer spending hours hunting around the internet for patches which generally are freely available; in that sense trading time for money.

"What we didn't think we'd have to do is build awareness with publishers," Treadwell adds. "With a number of notable exceptions, I've been amazed how publishers treat their customers. Not only do they not seem to know what they want or how they feel about the games they've bought, [but] frankly they don't seem to care either."

And he has some figures to back up his case, with around 23 per cent of a survey of GameShadow users claiming they have been dissuaded from buying a sequel because of bugs. Almost half said they had returned a product in the past because of such problems.

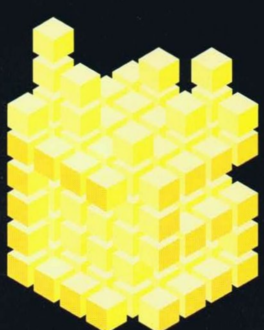
Clearly, with a game-patching service to sell, it's in Aardwork's interest to bandy about such figures, but with franchises and intellectual property so important to the industry, it would be a brave product manager to dismiss them out of hand. As well-publicised recent problems with *Thief 3* and *The Sims 2* prove, once consumers have spent their $99, they get a little irritated if they feel a game isn't working as it should.

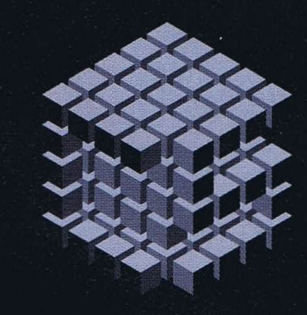
Yet GameShadow has slowly been





At its simplest, GameShadow checks your PC for all games and demos, identifying the versions installed. It then provides information about any patches or updates, and lets you download them from one central server





picking up converts. A big breakthrough recently came with the announcement that the service will be providing official support for Sports Interactive's *Football Manager 2005*. One bigger outfit dipping its toe into the water is Ubisoft, which will trial GameShadow on its forthcoming movie tie-in *Alexander*. Another feather in the cap came with a link-up with forward-looking UK publisher Digital Jesters. This deal sees GameShadow shipping on all its PC games and providing free support for patches and extras. Users also have the opportunity to upgrade to the full version of GameShadow.

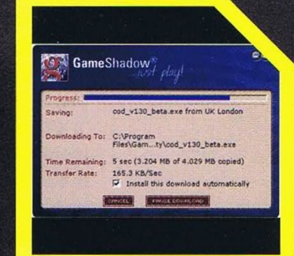
"One of the benefits of being a smaller and focused publisher is we can move quickly," explains Digital Jesters' technical manager **Jason Harman** when asked why he thought bigger publishers hadn't picked up on GameShadow. "When we first heard about GameShadow, the concept fitted with our ethos. There's no extra cost for the gamer and they get updates and patches for Digital Jesters' games for life."

"It's been a great deal for us," agrees Treadwell. "To a large degree, the best way for us to build up our profile is for GameShadow to be preinstalled on games. Even though we only launched with Digital Jesters in the summer, we've had lots of people, especially more casual gamers, come to us that way. Otherwise they just don't know about the service we can provide."

One business sector which has embraced GameShadow is the PC system-building industry. US outfit VoodooPC, which focuses on high-end gaming machines, has signed an exclusive hardware partnership deal for the US. This sees GameShadow rebranded as GameDoctor and preinstalled on all VoodooPC machines. "Our customers come back to us because of the service and quality equipment we provide. Delivering value-added services like GameDoctor enables us to provide a unique gaming experience," says VoodooPC's president **Rahul Sood**.

Other opportunities Treadwell is investigating include licensing the GameShadow database to companies which audit corporate networks. "Such information is useful to them so they can identify if games, unauthorised or not, are on a system," he says.

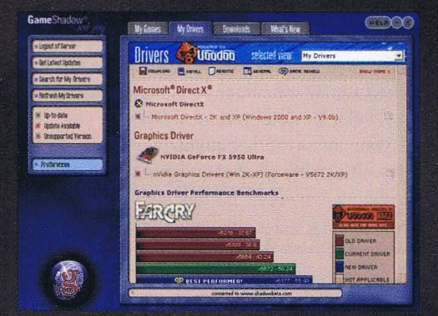
There's also the possibility of developing a non-games AppShadow to ensure corporate software is always up to date. "Games will always be our core market but GameShadow is a flexible piece of technology," Treadwell says. "In the past, we've been amazed how lethargic the industry can be, but I think we're still ahead of the curve. Things are starting to happen."



Treadwell believes that the utilitarian idea of the internet, as a magical source providing free stuff without responsibility, remains firmly embedded in the psyche. "I really think the attitude amongst some hardcore gamers that piracy is OK has to stop," he says. "It's hurting the business. *Doom 3* was cracked at launch and within two days had been downloaded 80,000 times."

Such mealymouthed behaviour even extends to users who roll over the GameShadow evaluation trial version. Limited to five patch downloads per trial version, which is registered to an email address, Treadwell says, after using their quota, some people will just re-register with an new email address and start the process again. "It says a lot about a certain type of PC gamers. They're happier going through this sort of hassle than paying a tenner," he bemoans. "And they're probably the people downloading pirated games."

Significantly, this is one area in which GameShadow can help publishers: it only allows users to download patches for legitimate copies, extending the lifespan of such games and providing a reason to refuse pirated games.



The next version of GameShadow provides a benchmark showing which graphics card drivers give the best performance for a range of hardware-intensive games





The patch model of GameShadow is being extended with support for mods, movies and demos, all neatly arranged in the same UI, making it simple to see what's available. At this stage however, there are only US and UK servers

## Moving Shadow

Currently in beta, the next version of GameShadow extends the assets offered by the service, allowing access to not only patches but also a selection of movies, mods and demos, each of which is organised around each game title. Other tweaks include the ability to launch GameShadow from the system tray, with full control provided over how and if the system auto-updates. "Gamers hate losing bandwidth and really hate having no control when they lose bandwidth," says Treadwell. The link-up with US system builder VoodooPC has also resulted in a neat benchmark system for Nvidia and ATI graphic card drivers. This demonstrates which driver produces the fastest gaming experience for a variety of games and, surprisingly, it's not always the latest driver that's fastest. In future, the company hopes to extend the idea for sound cards and motherboards, too.

# MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD

## Being there at GTA's beginning

BY GARY PENN

The latest *GTA* looks like being the grandest of all – a work of insane proportions to stay way ahead of the pretenders. And to think the concept almost never made it.

Who invented *GTA*? It's like asking who's Spartacus. The exploitation of the concept is what matters: no one person invented *GTA* – it just happened. It started with the technology to enable a distinctive viewpoint, and from that primordial soup crawled the notion of a believable city and playing cops and robbers. The title, *Race 'n' Chase*, accurately reflected the content: more *Pac-Man* than the *Elite* or *Mercenary* it was to become. Even the use of missions was like any other – triggered from a menu until eventually the decision was taken to 'naturalise' as much as possible into play.

> The exploitation of the concept is what matters: no one person invented Grand Theft Auto – it just happened

*GTA*'s development was like a snowball with dozens of eager hands pushing in all directions. Design by democracy, it was a large group of kids playing games they'd never played before, making it all up as they went along, everyone voicing their thoughts, seldom in unison, bickering, backstabbing. Opinions, ideas and people came and went but the unstoppable, unstable Tower of Babel grew, no one daring to remove parts in case the whole thing fell apart.

It was amateur-dramatic development, but the combination of naïvete and friction created a unique energy – there was something in the air and something in the concept. The problem was channelling the something, making the something work effectively – and (unbeknown to the development team at the time) before the US arm of the publisher overcame the convictions of the UK office and pulled the plug because progress was so erratic.

One of many turning points came at the end of 1996, when a discontented team tightened up the design and, perhaps most importantly, replaced the vehicle handling. Suddenly, the main toys were vaguely satisfying to use. Gone were the shopping trolleys with three remaining wheels, two of which were dodgy, on ice with a heavy and loose load. The cops were less believable than the Keystone variety until they were 'dumbed down' and accidentally became overly aggressive (only because they were trying to drive through everything). Suddenly, their performance was dramatic and direct and they paid attention to players.

But still the dust wouldn't settle. For a year the software had been crashing after five minutes of play, which meant adequate testing was impossible, especially for the playscape and mission designers and the audio department. The foundation was constantly appended and amended, variables changing without consideration or consultation, writers' words failing to match up with the mission functionality, and the potential for 'fail conditions' growing bigger by the day to cater for overly precise player challenges.

Eventually, a concerted effort was made to improve stability and no more features were added, until one day... it was playable for more than five minutes. It looked revolting, scars to reflect its abused heritage, but it was actually satisfying and almost compelling to play.

It went on to sell over three million worldwide, which is impressive but pales against the might of *GTAIII* and *Vice City* (and *San Andreas* will sell the most). Since *GTAIII*, the toyset has been so much more tangible and the theme more in tune with HBO sensibilities, making it more accessible to more people than its more abstract prototype precursors (and open to censorship in less liberal cultures).

The joy and pain of *GTA* is that it's so easy to have ideas for it. It's a system much like those employed by real toy manufacturers such as Playmobil: themed toysets with generic action figures at their heart and accessories and playscape features to enable appropriate play.

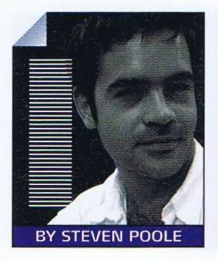
This developed into the notion of focusing all our efforts on a city-based repertoire – to become specialists in the exploitation of urban microcosms. (Consider how many books, films and television programmes take place in such settings; there's enough foundation for variety through familiarity to last a lifetime.) The key word is repertoire: familiar, practiced, developed parts – like actors. It's more than just reusing technology, it's knowing how to reuse it, how to make the toys and components as quickly as possible – to put less emphasis on the toyset's construction and more on its exploitation.

No one who worked on the first *GTA* could have predicted its effect, especially by its third iteration. Everyone, it seems, wants more of the same: play within strong thematic boundaries but without formal goals. The freedom to play with the toys the way you want to, the way you used to with the boyhood staples of action figures, vehicles and pretend weapons – to make your own entertainment.

Hey, things *are* what they used to be.

*Gary Penn began his career on Zzap!64, before working at BMG and DMA Design. He now makes games at Denki*





BY STEVEN POOLE

# TRIGGER HAPPY

## Chilling out... and shooting stuff

Sometimes you just want to chill out. Sometimes, surveillance cameras triggering floods of armed guards, or slavering demons from hell jumping out at you from around every corner, are just too, well, stressful. You can get that at the local supermarket. You don't necessarily want to recreate the experience at home. I have on occasion compared the philosopher Walter Benjamin's description of the new-fangled cinema to the potential of videogames: he wrote in awe about a form that enabled the spectator to 'calmly and adventurously go travelling'. But there's nothing calm about *Riddick* or *Far Cry*, great games though they are.

Videogames that trade on something other than fear and/or adrenaline are relatively few, and I think it's no coincidence that they are also the games that are usually looked down on by the self-elected 'hardcore' fraternity, because those are the gamers – for reasons of age and sex, among others – that favour crude hormonal responses. But you only have to look at the enormous success of *The Sims* and its sequel to realise there is a huge audience for something more contemplative in tempo – which doesn't necessarily mean less sophisticated.

Now, I wasn't thinking along these lines as I installed *Myst IV: Revelation* on to my shiny new liquid-cooled G5 one evening. I was, rather, yawning complacently at the prospect of bland point 'n' clickery, a kind of digital postcard for people who don't really like videogames. But when I next checked the time, still puzzling over how the heck I was going to counterbalance a floating ship made of rock with the right electromagnetic forces from above and below, it was three in the morning. Maybe there's something to this after all.

It's easy to list the objections first. A Ðthree-dimensional exploration game that doesn't allow free movement is, in this day and age, a prehistoric notion, a throwback to the halcyon days when CD-ROM was the next big thing. Inevitably, you spend much of your time in *Myst IV* patiently scrubbing the screen with your cursor because it's impossible to tell just by sight which objects are deemed interactive, or in which direction the game will allow you to travel next. Essentially you are forced to engage in random activity in order to discover the next link in an entirely predetermined sequence. This is hardly an advert for the kind of dynamic, reactive experience we have been taught to expect by truly 'experimental' games (by which I mean those in which you can conduct fruitful experiments) such as *Deus Ex*.

And yet this maddening old-school style has some interesting effects. For a start, obviously it escapes the kinds of glitches in 'real' 3D games whereby you can feel you are fighting against the interface and the movement mechanics more often than you are engaging with the spatial pr oblems of a well-designed environment. And more importantly, perhaps, it forces the player to privilege looking over moving. In many games where you are hellbent on moving and fighting with fluidity and precision, the most gorgeous environment may be relegated to a pretty backdrop. In *Myst IV* you stand in one place and look. So a kind of optical pleasure is privileged, a concentration on enjoying and then analysing the view. And there is no denying that *Myst IV* is visually beautiful. Sunlight streams in through summerhouse windows, palm fronds wave gently in the breeze, dark emerald caverns glint and glitter. The wealth and detail of design and animation are extraordinary.

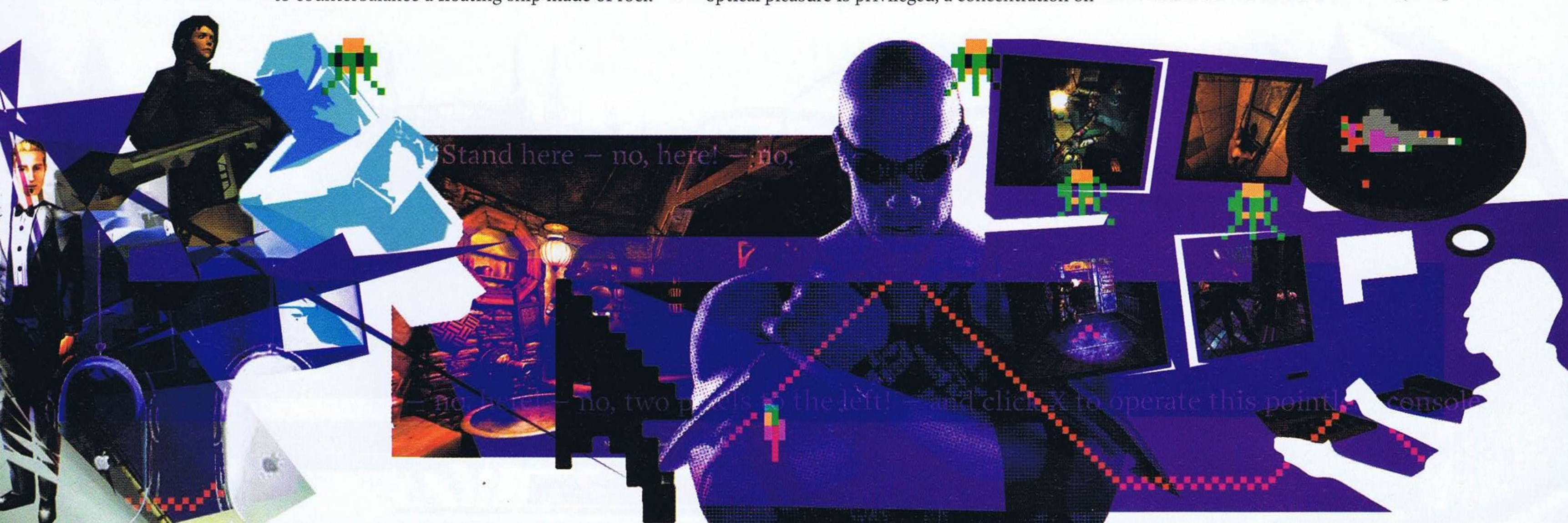
Another interesting virtue of the point 'n' click interface is that its precision allows an unusually strong tactile, haptic sense. Using your disembodied-hand cursor to grab levers and twist dials invokes an experience of really interacting with arcane machinery that is unmatched by the legions of first- or thirdperson games which tell you: 'Stand here – no, here! – no, two pixels to the left! – and click X to operate this pointless console'. With its enormous variety of grabbable contraptions, *Myst IV* thereby offers the closest mechanical analogue to a true steampunk aesthetic. The tortuous logic problems which these machines embody, meanwhile, can often make you feel as though you are being subjected to some bizarre multimedia Mensa entrance test, but in their intellectual rigour they clearly shame what pass for puzzles in the vast majority of games.

I don't think *Myst IV* is a great game, but I don't think it's flatly dismissable either. The conventional videogame-fan wisdom which avers that *Broken Sword*, say, is good and *Myst* is bad seems to me incoherent. If you want to calmly and adventurously go travelling, to take an engaging holiday inside your desktop, *Myst IV* does it rather well. The videogame artform is a broad church, and there is ample room for things that cater to all casts of mind.

Now, however, my trigger finger is itching, and it's time for a quick blast on PomPom's *SpaceTripper*, a glorious fusion of *Defender* and *Uridium*. Ah yes, shooting stuff is good too.

**The conventional wisdom which avers that Broken Sword is good and Myst is bad seems to me incoherent**

*Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life of Videogames (Fourth Estate). Email: steven_poole@mac.com*



# THE GUEST COLUMN

## And so the journey begins...

BY TIM GUEST

After a week in South Korea, I finally tracked down the king of the world. He doesn't look like a king. If you saw him on the street at 9am, as he pulled up the shutters to his hamburger restaurant, you might think he was down on his luck. His shoulders are slumped. He has a tired look in his eye. It's no wonder: ruling the world takes up between ten and 20 hours a day, and that's not including the time he spends flipping burgers. After four hours' sleep, he barely has any energy for the restaurant. These days, by 9:30am, the place is usually still dead, so he walks upstairs to his office, sits down on his padded swivel chair, and becomes king.

His name is **Kyu Nam Choi**, and his kingdom is *Lineage II*, the sequel to the largest and most populated virtual world on the planet.

Each week, over 27 million people worldwide abandon our reality for virtual worlds like Lineage II

I met him in the Seoul offices of NCSoft, Korea's most successful game developer. There, in a conference room on the eighth floor, Choi – particularly weary from a long, heroic battle the night before – brushed his long fringe from his eyes, leaned back, sipped a plum juice, and explained his double life.

Offline, if he's lucky, his restaurant serves 200 customers a week; online, as the most successful player in *Lineage II*, he rules over three million subjects. Offline, he has trouble paying his bills; online, when he runs short of cash, he just raises the taxes.

Each week, over 27 million people worldwide – more than passed through US immigration at Ellis Island throughout the 20th century – abandon our reality for virtual worlds like Choi's, in the same way Americans once abandoned old Europe. Many spend more time in these shared imaginary worlds – alternate universes like *EverQuest*, *Star Wars Galaxies* and *The Sims Online* – than they do at their real jobs. There, through the electronic looking glass, they can lead seductive new second lives, they can build and sell property, work, get married, get a divorce or die, and leave the limitations of their body and the troubles of the real world far behind them.

When I discovered the extent of this mass migration, I decided to follow. I would take up residence in the virtual worlds and report back what I found. For my first trip, I travelled to South Korea, partly because I was fascinated by Choi's double life, and also because in South Korea the global mania for computer gaming has reached its peak.

Each year, twice as many people visit Korean-made virtual worlds as visit Korea. Professional Korean gamers can earn six-figure salaries, have their own television shows and are recognised by screaming fans on the street. Choi – the most successful massively multiplayer online gamer in Korea – was more modest. He wouldn't even let me take his picture. But perhaps there's more to that than modesty...

Over a cup of Starbucks coffee in Coex, Asia's largest mall, Seoul-based games critic Park Sang Woo explained to me that, compared to gamers from other cultures, Koreans identify much more closely with their online selves. When their characters are assaulted online, Korean players sometimes take real-world revenge. Inspector Byong Il Sung of the Korean police's Cyber-Terror Unit told me there were at least a hundred such 'offline PK' attacks each month. As the most powerful player in *Lineage II*, Choi is especially at risk. So, when I raised my camera, he quickly shook his head.

In the real world, when Choi opens his restaurant's shutters he has to watch over his shoulder for vengeful player-killers; in the game, as the most powerful character, he could kill ten attackers single-handed. In the real world, nobody talks to Choi; in the game, everyone wants an audience with the king. It was this liberation from real-world limitations, he told me, that kept him playing up to 20 hours a day, even as his restaurant failed. "I have killed, I have been killed, I have been reborn," he said. "These are things I can't do in real life. I don't own a car, but in the game I can fly."

Choi's entire adult life had been focused on his business. He trusted no one; he had never known a close friend. Then, one afternoon, by chance, he discovered *Lineage II*. Through the game, he began to find the friendship he had missed all his life. Now, at the age of 32, he's making up for lost time. He has never had a girlfriend, but he hopes one day to meet someone online, get married and settle down. Until then, despite his struggling restaurant business, he wouldn't give up playing *Lineage II* for the world.

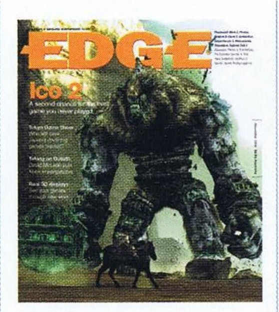
At NCSoft HQ, as Choi prepared to go home to his hamburger restaurant and to his royal throne, I asked one last question. If he had to pick between the real world or the game world, which would he choose? He closed his eyes. "In real life, even though I own my business, I am just an ordinary person," he said. "In the game life, I rule the world."

There was a long pause. He opened his eyes. "I choose the game."

*Tim Guest is an author and veteran videogame/technology journalist. His book, My Life In Orange, is published by Granta*



# Inbox




Issue 2



**In your article on indie shmups (E141) you gave three of the games 'extra backslaps' for acknowledging the Mac. I would also like to thank the writer of that article for acknowledging the fact that they were acknowledging the Mac. With a gaming scene that is only just getting its hands on KOTOR it's easy (even for Ða Mac owner like myself) to forget that the Mac is a gaming platform at all. However, it is comforting to know that, should more companies start to release their games for Ðboth platforms in the same way that Blizzard and, to a lesser extent, Bungie does, Edge is ready to cover them.**
Mark Raisbeck

**We can't promise to cover many Mac games, but home-brew shooters that can be played on office machines will always find warm welcomes.**

Although I'm sure you've been inundated with letters regarding age ratings on games, I'm completely exhausted by the complete ignorance I see on a daily basis. Allow me to explain. My work for a games specialist has recently had me questioning the ethics of gaming. I'm not talking about being paid to promote certain games or lie to customers (we aren't), I am talking about the ignorance that most parents show towards rated games.

While at work, I am confronted by the same situation at least three times a day. A child picks up a MA15+ rated game, and the parent brings it to the till. I inform the parent that the game is in no way suitable for the young child, and would expect the parent to listen and place the game back on the shelf. In the majority of cases the answer would simply be something along the lines of "Thank you but we will have it anyway," or the ever-more-annoying answer: "They've seen it all many times before."

The question I raise is: why? Why have these children seen it all before? *Grand Theft Auto* is filled with prostitution, violence, rape, drugs and bad language, yet parents seem to have exposed their children to these types of behaviours before. The complete ignorance of the parent is beyond belief. If that parent had taken this young child to see an R-rated film at the local cinema, the child would be stopped from entering the cinema regardless of the view of the parent. In stores, however, we have no right to stop the parent from buying the game even if we know the game is for a young child. Recently, one of the best responses I received from a parent was: "Well, kids aren't really kids for long these days." And I suppose this fact would have nothing to do with parents exposing their children to such violent and adult materials at younger and younger ages. Ratings are made for a reason, and without trying to sound like a killjoy, they should be adhered to without exception. Although I don't believe that games like *Manhunt* actually promote the use of violence, constant exposure to such titles from a young age cannot help but harm the moral upbringing of children. There is no benefit in allowing a child to play age-restricted games.

**It's about time the press, and the government, woke up and realised that the fault does not lie with the shops or the developers, but with ignorant parents**

Stopping the production of these games would simply be surrendering to the negative public view of gaming. It's about time the press, and the government, woke up and realised that the fault does not lie with the shops or the developers/publishers, but rather in the hands of ignorant parents.
**Ben Tipple**



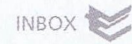
Oddly the content in GTA: San Andreas was given less scrutiny than normal by the OFLC

Clearly it has no control over parents abusing the system, but the OFLC will probably be able to help bring a solution to this problem to the fore the instant government passes an R rating for games. Edge suspects most violent games will immediately be slapped with a restricted rating in an effort to shield the young from such content altogether, rather than have to worry about separating shades of grey.

I am upset because of a little company named Nintendo. They have given me so much pleasure over the years, providing me with an abundance of classic games to experience and enjoy. However, why do they feel they can re-release waves and waves of these old games to the public time and time again (see *Super Mario Brothers*, *Super Mario Brothers DX*, *Super Mario Brothers* NES classic, etc)? Yes, these games are incredible, but couldn't Nintendo please turn their attention to creating something fresh? Nintendo is like the battered and bruised boxer who's thrilling people with highlight reels of his knockouts from yesteryear without producing any significant performances of late.

I have a dream and I'd like to share it with you. My dream is that Nintendo will one day make a brand-new Mario game. But not just any Mario game – a side-scrolling Mario game in the style of the 2D classics we all love and cherish. A Mario game with all the playability and addictive qualities of the classics they keep rehashing backed up by the power of their latest system. Today's consoles have unbelievable amounts of power – why not use this power to fuel a new classic?
**Frazer Hammill**

There's something about the forthcoming *Super Mario DS* that doesn't look



quite... *right*, but it could still turn out brightly. And don't ignore *Yoshi's Touch And Go* (see p51).

As a medical doctor and a long-term gamer I have been following with interest the media's knee-jerk reaction to the two men who donned camo gear and shot a couple, allegedly inspired by a videogame (*Counter-Strike*). One newspaper article, no matter what some gamers think, did actually have a few (if somewhat limited) points to make – for example, games with age restrictions should not be sold to young people less than the age stated.

However, the picture painted by the so-called 'informed' newspapers – that all videogames are essentially bad for development – does in fact have an opposite pole to the argument. As you may imagine, I regularly come into contact with a wide spectrum of diseases and problems, and on many an occasion I have recommended videogames. To give you just three examples, in the case of an anxious and agoraphobic lady who rarely went out and feared public transport I advised her to buy a GBA and a few games to take out with her on journeys; in the second case, with an elderly gentleman who had suffered a cerebro-vascular accident (stroke) and consequently developed weakness down his left side, I recommended buying a Gamecube and *Super Monkey Ball* as he did have some awkward movement in his left arm and hand; and finally, a young man who underwent spinal surgery with resultant long recovery time I advised to buy a PlayStation2 and a dance mat so when he was fit enough to walk he could use this to further speed up recovery, along with physio (and occupational therapy, which is unfortunately fairly infrequent). You may also be pleased to know this man was fairly intelligent and thus I told him about **Edge** – now he's considering a subscription after buying it religiously for the last couple of months!

In all these cases, and many more not mentioned here, videogames have had a positive impact on those unfortunate to be rendered with mobility problems or ill health.

I will definitely continue to recommend games in the future. Unfortunately, as yet the Department of Health doesn't have the funds (or probably, and more accurately, doesn't consider gaming to be of use in the medical setting) to add videogames and/or consoles to the prescription list. Given the relative low cost of gaming these days, it's a small price to pay when, along with so much enjoyment, games certainly help some people suffering ill health get better or improve their quality of living.
**Dr Richard Evans**

## With an elderly gentleman who had suffered a stroke, I recommended buying Super Monkey Ball, as he did have some movement in his left arm

Good work, doc. But what would you prescribe for Nintendo Thumb?

"Playboy's going to be covering videogames, from the perspective of an adult who has a life." This brilliant quote caught my eye. I can see how, thanks to innovatively designed female characters taking their clothes off, gaming has shrugged off its image of being played by spotty adolescent nerds pleasuring themselves to Lara Croft's latest bra size. Adults with lives everywhere will, I'm sure, be ordering *Playboy: The Mansion* right now.

I fail to see how there is any sort of maturity in this Playboy 'article'. Was there honestly any seriousness to the idea? Let's take their very own game, for example – one of the games pioneering videogaming's maturity boost. OK. I'm a little stuck for ideas. Oh, wait, are they trying to put sex, and possibly other grown-up themes, into games? Intriguing. After all, films do it; why not games? Actually, it appears they are not. It seems it's a cash-in on *The Sims* with the USP options of 'Get out boobies' and 'Mash badly rendered faces together while wiggling bum'.

I'm not sure what annoys me the most: the fact that this is all making videogames look more immature and silly, or the fact that some idiot is claiming that because I play games without boobies I clearly have no life.
**Sam Wilderspin**

But would it make any difference if it was 'Mash *amazingly* rendered faces together while wiggling bum'? Actually, no, you're right, it's all just a tad sad.



**Grand Theft Auto is the most overhyped sham of a game this generation. I realise I'm in the minority with this opinion, and that I might be considered a little jaded, but please consider the reasoning behind my stance.**

**Firstly, GTA does not offer 'freedom' in any sense of the word. It offers players the chance to navigate a poorly rendered character from point A to point B in a glitchy 3D environment, in between which they have an exhaustive list of actions they can perform. NPC reactions are predictable, finite and inflexible; there is nothing to spur players on to the next level trigger save the novelty of deviating from the plot to take part in pointless folly like riding around in taxis or finding secret items in obscure little corners.**

**Am I the only person who thinks of Grand Theft Auto in this way? I play games to be entertained, you realise, so a game that asks me to use my own imagination to make things interesting defies everything I love about playing games. I'd like to be lead along, rewarded, given a challenge – San Andreas, Vice City and its ilk are just potty-mouthed and as mundane as Shen Mue.**

**I appreciate games that take pride in their artistic vision, games that take me on unforgettable journeys that can be shared experiences with my peers. But if that shared experience is going to create conversations that run along the lines of "Hey, did you know you can beat/jump/drive a person/building/donkey through some ridiculous object? How cool is that?", I'd rather give up video games entirely and get a real life.**
Stephane Marais

**Like we say, if you don't like it, don't buy it. It's your right and privilege as a consumer.**

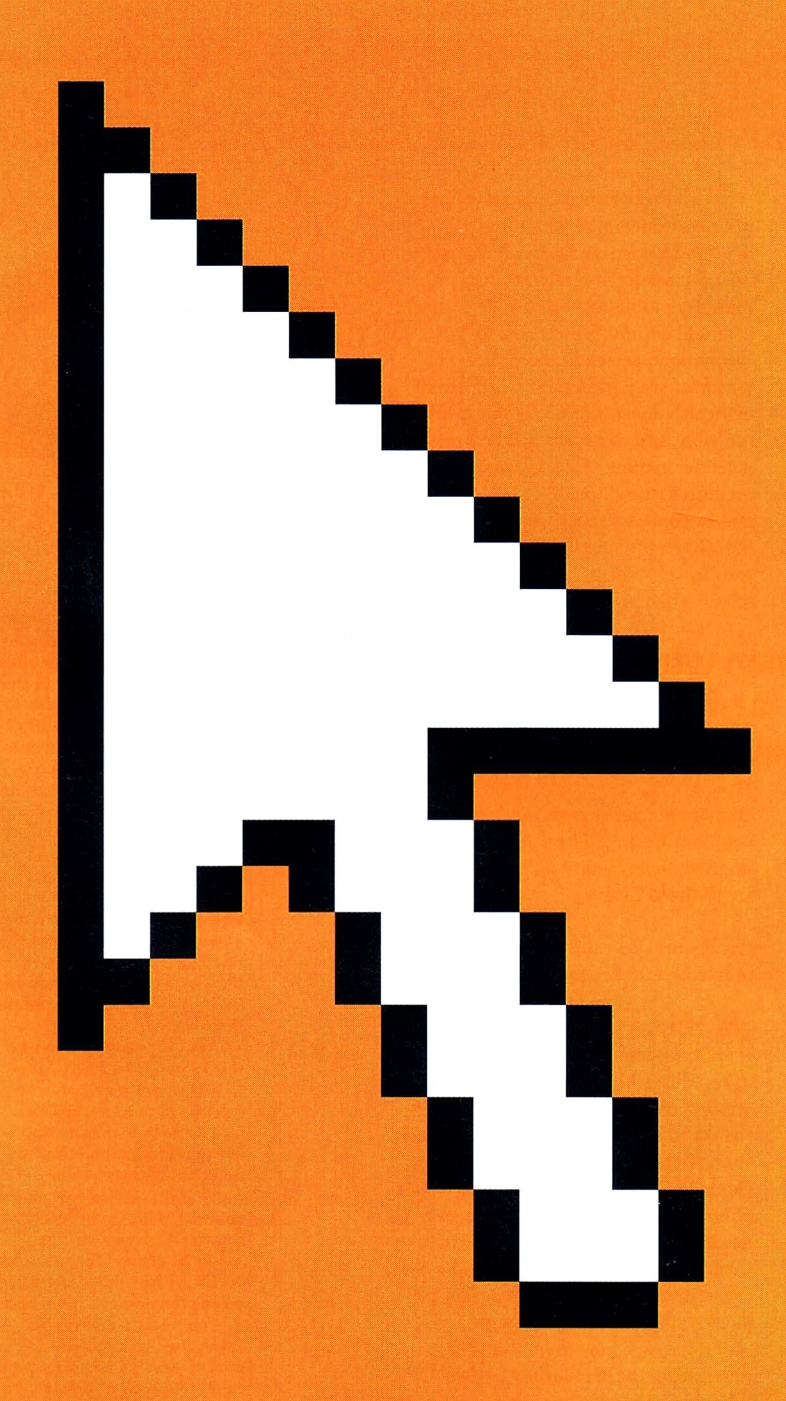
I knew it would happen eventually, but seeing something from Fumito Ueda's art team on the cover of **Edge** magazine for the first time was just so special. Thank you.
**Chris le Roux**

We do it all for people like you, Chris.

I was watching Ghost In The Shell a few weeks ago. I don't know if you've seen it, but it's set in a future urban cityscape. Near the beginning of the film during one of the few action sequences, where they're chasing a guy with a machine gun, it came to me how brilliant the next instalment of the *Grand Theft Auto* series would be if it was based in some future setting. Think buildings, skyscrapers from Blade Runner and a few of those cool flying digital adverts , and perhaps a few cars and vehicles à la Back To The Future 2 and Minority Report!

Could you imagine the potential freshness and excitement such a game could conjur up? Imagine the main character, if you will, perhaps with bionic cyborg enhancements, running down a sprawling cyber metropolis, stealing hovercars, flying cars, etc, via the aid of a jetpack, and working for rival multinational corporations rather than gangs, fighting for ultimate control of the city. I just thought it is a great idea, and, even if no one else does, could you pass my thoughts and comments on to Rockstar?
**Mark Taktak**

We're sure Rockstar will read your ideas right here, Mark, but there's more chance of the past being further plundered before the *GTA* series looks to the future.



# Next month

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